

COMMITTEE ON GOVERNMENTAL OPERATIONS,  
STATE & FEDERAL LEGISLATION, JOINTLY WITH THE  
COMMITTEE ON CRIMINAL JUSTICE

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CITY COUNCIL  
CITY OF NEW YORK

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TRANSCRIPT OF THE MINUTES

OF THE

COMMITTEE ON GOVERNMENTAL OPERATIONS,  
STATE & FEDERAL LEGISLATION, JOINTLY  
WITH THE COMMITTEE ON CRIMINAL JUSTICE

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Tuesday, April 14, 2026

Start: 10:41 A.M.

Recess: 1:47 P.M.

HELD AT: Council Chambers - City Hall

B E F O R E: Hon. Gale Brewer, *Chair*  
Hon. Selvena N. Brooks-Powers, *Chair*

COUNCIL MEMBERS:

Jumaane Williams, Public Advocate

Tiffany L. Cabán

Eric Dinowitz

Oswald J. Feliz

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Frank Morano

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A P P E A R A N C E S

Nell Colén,  
Deputy Commissioner of Programs and Community  
Partnerships for the  
New York City Department of Correction (DOC)

Valerie Greisokh,  
Assistant Commissioner, Division of Programs and  
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Executive Director of the New York City Board of  
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Victor Pate,  
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Vote In NYC Jails Coalition

Michael Klinger,  
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Lead Community Organizer in the Community  
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Robert Willis,  
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Anthony Posada,  
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Community Justice Unit; Founder of Vote in NYC  
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Kai Rosenthal,  
Co-President of the League of Women Voters of  
the City of New York

A P P E A R A N C E S (CONTINUED)

Pharien Griffith,  
Chair of Civic Engagement at the New York Branch  
of the NAACP; Member of the Vote in NYC Jails  
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Jarret Berg,  
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Clyanna Lightbourn,  
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Jan Combopiano,  
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Karen Wharton,  
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Amira Wittenberg,  
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Zachary Katznelson,  
Executive Director of the Independent Rikers  
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Bob Libal,  
Senior Organizing Strategist  
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2 SERGEANT LEWIS: Mic check, mic check, mic  
3 check. This is a mic check for the Committee on  
4 Governmental Operations, State & Federal Legislation,  
5 and Criminal Justice. Today's date is April 14, 2026;  
6 recorded by Walter Lewis in the Chambers.

7 (PAUSE)

8 SERGEANT AT ARMS: Good morning. Good  
9 morning. Welcome to the New York City Council hearing  
10 on the Committee on Governmental Operations, State  
11 and Federal Legislation, jointly with Criminal  
12 Justice.

13 At this time, please silence all  
14 electronics and do not approach the dais. If you need  
15 to testify, please see a Sergeant at Arms.

16 Any other questions or concerns, you may  
17 reach a Sergeant at Arms.

18 Thank you for your cooperation.

19 Chairs, you may begin.

20 CHAIRPERSON BREWER: [GAVEL] So, good  
21 morning; I'm Gale Brewer, the Chair of the Committee  
on Governmental Operations, State and Federal  
Legislation. I would like to welcome the  
representatives from the administration, members of  
the public, and my colleagues who have joined us. We

1  
2 have so far Council Members Narcisse, Marano, and  
3 Dinowitz. And then in a few minutes, there will be  
4 remarks from the awesome, awesome Criminal Justice  
5 Chair.

6 At today's hearing, we will be  
7 conducting: *Oversight of Voting on Rikers Island*.

8 Voting is our most basic right, the right  
9 from which all other rights flow. But on Rikers  
10 Island, very few people appear able to exercise that  
11 right. Today, we will examine why it is so difficult  
12 for people on Rikers Island to vote.

13 Most people held on Rikers are eligible  
14 to vote. Over 80% of the nearly 7,000 people  
15 currently on Rikers are all being held pretrial, and  
16 retain the right to vote.

17 Let me be clear. Voters held on Rikers  
18 who were serving time for misdemeanor offenses also  
19 maintain their voting rights, as well as those who  
20 have not been convicted of anything. They're waiting  
21 for court.

22 But current law and practices are  
23 effectively preventing the vast majority of these  
24 individuals from casting their votes. By law,  
25 currently, incarcerated voters can only vote by

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2 absentee or early mail ballot. They must request a  
3 ballot by filling out a physical absentee ballot  
4 request form, an early mail ballot request form, or  
5 applying through the online portal, which is not easy  
6 to find on the island. The physical forms must be  
7 delivered, either through the postal system or by the  
8 Department of Correction staff. Once the applications  
9 are approved, the ballots must then be delivered to  
10 Rikers Island, either through the mail or picked up  
11 by DOC staff. Corrections staff only make one trip to  
12 the Board of Elections per week. And mail at Rikers  
13 Island is slow, making this a tedious process.

14           Voting using early or mail ballots  
15 requires a voter to place a completed ballot in an  
16 envelope, seal a ballot affirmation envelope, and  
17 sign it. Any error on the ballot envelope will result  
18 in the BOE rejecting the ballot. If a ballot is  
19 rejected, the Board of Elections is required to send  
20 a notice about the errors and give the voter an  
21 opportunity to cure any defects if they are curable.  
And you'll hear more about this via a wonderful bill  
that my colleague has. These notices are sent to  
either the person's address of registration or the  
address of the application, which, as you can

1  
2 imagine, may not be the place where the voter is  
3 currently incarcerated. If the defect is not curable,  
4 the Elections Board is required to inform the voter  
5 about alternate ways to vote, such as filing an  
6 affidavit ballot at a local polling place—that's not  
7 possible—or obtaining a new absentee or early mail  
8 ballot. However, no surprise to you, neither of these  
9 options is realistically available to incarcerated  
10 voters.

11  
12 In the June 2024 primary, of 155 early  
13 and absentee ballots that were either delivered to  
14 voters on Rikers, only 72 were returned and counted,  
15 and that's after a lot of work by volunteers.

16 While the Board of Elections is  
17 responsible for conducting voter registration and  
18 processing requests for early mail and absentee  
19 ballots for voters on Rikers Island, it cannot do so  
20 without the cooperation of the Board of Correction.  
21 BOC, in turn, relies heavily on outside volunteers to  
conduct voter registration and help individuals fill  
out ballots and ballot request forms. But since  
Correction decides which facilities volunteers can  
visit, and the limit of the number of visits  
volunteers can make, it is not clear how often a

1  
2 given unit is visited. There are many units and  
3 houses on Rikers Island.

4 While it seems like the Board of  
5 Elections and the Department of Correction have been  
6 making an effort to work together to make the process  
7 more efficient—they have been, I want to give credit  
8 where credit is due—clearly, more needs to be done  
9 to ensure that every eligible voter on Rikers has the  
10 opportunity to register to vote, to get an absentee  
11 ballot, if they want one, and to ensure their vote is  
12 actually counted.

13 And I have to say, for those of us who've  
14 been working on this for a while, we feel the only  
15 way to do this is to have polling places.

16 In addition to doing oversight, we will  
17 also be hearing two pieces of legislation:

18 First, we will hear Intro 786, sponsored  
19 by Chair Brooks-Powers, which would amend the  
20 procedure for and reporting on curing ballots, as I  
21 indicated earlier, for voters in Correction custody.

We will also be hearing Intro number 541,  
sponsored by Public Advocate Jumaane Williams, which  
would require reporting on voting in jails.

1  
2 I would like to thank the following  
3 council staff for their work on this hearing from the  
4 Government Operations Committee: Johari Frazier,  
5 Erica Cohen, and Saiyemul Hamid.

6 And for my staff, I want to thank the  
7 very special Cynthia Hornig and everyone who made  
8 this hearing run smoothly.

9 And now, I don't think anybody else has  
10 joined us, I would like to turn it over to the  
11 indomitable Chair Brooks-Powers to give her opening  
12 statement.

13 CHAIRPERSON BROOKS-POWERS: Thank you so  
14 much, and good morning. I'm Council Member Selvena  
15 Brooks-Powers, Chair of the Committee on Criminal  
16 Justice.

17 I want to thank Chair Brewer for  
18 co-chairing today's joint oversight hearing on voting  
19 and Rikers, and thank everyone for being here. I'm  
20 really excited about today's conversation. I've been  
21 talking to Chair Brewer about this for some time now.

The right to vote is fundamental, and in  
New York, individuals who are detained pretrial or  
serving time for misdemeanor offenses remain eligible  
to vote.

1  
2 At Rikers Island, the vast majority of  
3 individuals are eligible to participate in our  
4 elections. Yet, significant barriers continue to  
5 prevent many from exercising that right.

6 Today's hearing will examine those  
7 barriers, including challenges related to voter  
8 registration, curing ballots, access to information,  
9 ballot delivery and return, and the coordination  
10 between the Department of Correction and the Board of  
11 Elections.

12 We will hear from the Department of  
13 Correction, the Board of Elections, advocates, and  
14 the public about how the current system is working in  
15 practice, where it is falling short, and what steps  
16 can be taken to ensure that eligible voters in  
17 custody are able to participate in our democracy.

18 We will also explore how other  
19 jurisdictions have approached voting in jails and  
20 what lessons may be applied here in New York City.

21 We are also considering two pieces of  
legislation, as mentioned:

Introduction 780, sponsored by me, would  
require the Department of Correction to work with the  
Board of Elections to establish procedures for curing

1  
2 ballots and to report on outcomes related to ballot  
3 defects and rejections.

4 Intro number 797, sponsored by the Public  
5 Advocate, would require annual reporting on voter  
6 registration and voting activities in city jails.

7 Together, these bills aim to improve  
8 transparency and ensure that eligible voters in  
9 custody are not disenfranchised due to administrative  
10 barriers.

11 Ensuring access to the ballot for  
12 eligible voters in our custody is not only a legal  
13 obligation, but also a matter of fairness and  
14 integrity in our democratic process. As a former  
15 advisor of the NAACP Jamaica Youth Branch, where I  
16 supported efforts to expand civic engagement and  
17 voter access, including for justice-impacted  
18 communities, I know how critical this work is.

19 I look forward to a productive discussion  
20 on how we can strengthen access to voting, improve  
21 coordination across agencies, and ensure that every  
22 eligible New Yorker has the opportunity to make their  
23 voice heard.

24 I would like to thank my staff and the  
25 committee staff for their hard work: Chad Benjamin,

1  
2 Policy Analyst; Jeremy Whiteman, Senior Counsel to  
3 the Committee. Casey Lajszky, Financial Analyst;  
4 Julian Martin, my Deputy Chief of Staff; Kierra  
5 Powell, my Communications Director; and Renee Taylor,  
6 my Chief of Staff.

7 I thank everyone again who is joining us  
8 today, and I look forward to a thoughtful and  
9 constructive discussion on voting on Rikers. Thank  
10 you, Chair.

11 CHAIRPERSON BREWER: Thank you very much.  
12 I now turn over to the Public Advocate to talk about  
13 his bill or anything else he would like to discuss.

14 PUBLIC ADVOCATE WILLIAMS: Thank you so  
15 much. Maybe the Knicks. I appreciate the opportunity  
16 to speak.

17 Morning, as mentioned, my name is Jumaane  
18 Williams; I'm the Public Advocate for the City of New  
19 York. I'd like to thank Chairs Brewer and  
20 Brooks-Powers and the Members of the Committees  
21 holding this important hearing.

There are close to 7,000 people who are  
detained in Rikers Island, most of whom, as  
mentioned, are actually eligible to vote.

1  
2           Though people who have been convicted of  
3 a felony cannot vote while incarcerated, most people  
4 on Rikers are being detained pretrial, or serving  
5 time for misdemeanors, and, therefore, are eligible  
6 to cast a ballot.

7           Despite this, unfortunately, only a  
8 fraction of the incarcerated population in jails  
9 votes. As the majority of the Rikers population is  
10 Black and brown, it is hard not to hear the echoes of  
11 Jim Crow and this effective disenfranchisement of  
12 thousands of potential voters. And even if it's not  
13 fully Jim Crow, if you have the right and you can't  
14 exercise it, it's the same thing.

15           The people detained on Rikers rely on  
16 volunteers who come into the jails to assist people  
17 in registering to vote and requesting absentee  
18 ballots. Even with assistance, registering to vote  
19 while incarcerated presents unique challenges. What  
20 district is a person who has been locked up for  
21 months registered in? What address should they use? A  
person might lose their apartment as a result of  
being detained, for example, and the high turnover  
rate of the jail population often means that a person  
misses deadlines ahead of Election Day. Additionally,

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2 with no access to the internet and limited social  
3 interaction with people who are not in their housing  
4 unit, people are generally deprived of information  
5 while incarcerated, which makes it more difficult to  
6 be engaged in elections. Distrust of the government  
7 also deters people from voting.

8           Though volunteers can help people on  
9 Rikers register to vote, it is still the  
10 responsibility of the BOE and DOC to deliver the  
11 absentee ballots to the jail population and to count  
12 those completed ballots. This seems straightforward,  
13 but often isn't. Advocates report that the BOE  
14 routinely rejects completed registration forms,  
15 absentee ballots, and completed ballots from eligible  
16 incarcerated New Yorkers.

17           In the outside world, a person whose  
18 ballot was rejected, as you have heard, would be  
19 notified and would have the opportunity to address  
20 any issues. The same is often not true of those on  
21 Rikers Island. In practice, some of those who  
22 requested a ballot receive it, and only some of those  
23 ballots are counted, leaving only a small percentage  
24 of the eligible population actually able to vote.

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2 This would not be acceptable in the  
3 outside world, and we should not accept it inside  
4 Rikers either.

5 New York City can and should be doing  
6 more. As mentioned, I'm glad that we are doing  
7 something, but there is a lot more that needs to be  
8 done.

9 There are other municipalities, like  
10 Ulster County, that send bipartisan election  
11 commissioners and election officials in person, along  
12 with trained volunteers, to their local jail to  
13 process registration forms, ballot applications, and  
14 ballots themselves. DOC can remove barriers to these  
15 voter registration volunteers to enter the facilities  
16 by not making them wait hours to enter the jail or  
17 overly restricting what voter education materials  
18 they can bring in.

19 What would truly address this lack of  
20 access is hosting a polling place in Rikers Island  
21 itself, so that those detained there can vote in  
person without worrying about requesting an absentee  
ballot or having it rejected.

1  
2 Today, we are hearing two pieces of  
3 legislation that will give us a better scope of the  
4 voting landscape inside Rikers Island:

5 My bill, Intro 797, will require the  
6 Department of Correction to report annually on voter  
7 registration inside city jails, including the number  
8 of completed voter registration forms disaggregated  
9 by facility and demographic information, as well as  
10 the number of absentee ballots distributed to  
11 incarcerated people.

12 Intro 786, introduced by Chair Brooks-  
13 Powers, and of which I am also a sponsor, would  
14 require the DOC Commissioner to collaborate with the  
15 BOE to create procedures for curing ballots for  
16 voters on Rikers, as well as assist people in their  
17 custody with obtaining new ballots as necessary.  
18 Additionally, it would require DOC to report on  
19 statistics over the last five years regarding curing  
20 ballots for voters in their custody, including how  
21 many ballots were not counted.

22 Civil rights, including voting rights,  
23 are not optional. Just because a person is  
24 incarcerated does not mean they do not have a vested  
25 interest in their communities, including who

1  
2 represents them in government. Voting is one of a  
3 number of pro-social behaviors associated with  
4 reduced recidivism, so ensuring that our incarcerated  
5 people can exercise their constitutional right to  
6 vote is a matter of public safety.

7 I look forward to working with the  
8 Council and Administration to ensure that everyone  
9 who's eligible is able to vote. We should be making  
10 sure that people are as connected as possible  
11 civically. We seem to sometimes do the opposite in  
12 terms of housing, employment, and, of course, voting.  
13 They have a voice that is going to be particularly  
14 impactful.

15 And lastly, I'll say there are a lot of  
16 names being thrown around. I call folks at Rikers  
17 "detained individuals" and maybe "incarcerated  
18 individuals". Some people, unfortunately, still use  
19 the word inmates. What I'd like to do is to talk  
20 about New Yorkers, New Yorkers who have the right to  
21 vote, and that right to vote is not being--they're  
not able to exercise it. And what would we do with  
any group of New Yorkers who are in that situation? I  
think we know the answer. So let's apply that here.  
Thank you.

1  
2 CHAIRPERSON BREWER: Thank you very much.  
3 Now we'd like to turn it over to Committee Counsel,  
4 Johari Frasier, to administer the oath.

5 And I want to thank the Department of  
6 Corrections for being here. The Board of Elections is  
7 on Zoom.

8 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Good morning. We will  
9 now hear testimony from the Administration. Before we  
10 begin, I will administer the affirmation. Panelists,  
11 please raise your right hand.

12 Do you affirm to tell the truth, the  
13 whole truth, and nothing but the truth, before this  
14 committee and to respond honestly to Council Member  
15 questions?

16 PANEL: (UN-MIC'D) (INAUDIBLE)

17 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Thank you. You may  
18 begin when ready.

19 CHAIRPERSON BREWER: I just want to be  
20 sure that the Board of Elections said yes. Did you  
21 say yes?

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR RYAN: I thought the  
oath was being administered to the Department of  
Correction at this time, but yes, of course.

CHAIRPERSON BREWER: Okay, thank you.

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Thank you, Mr. Ryan.

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR RYAN: You're welcome.

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER COLÓN: Chair

Brooks-Powers, Chair Brewer, and the Members of the  
Committees on Criminal Justice and Government  
Operations, State and Federal Legislation, my name is  
Nell Colén, and I serve as the Deputy Commissioner of  
Programs and Community Partnerships for the New York  
City Department of Correction. I'm joined today by  
Valerie Greisokh, an Assistant Commissioner in the  
Division of Programs and Community Partnerships, who  
oversees the Department's civic engagement efforts  
and works closely with our partners in this area.

I appreciate the opportunity to discuss  
our civic engagement work and our continued  
commitment to ensuring that all eligible individuals  
are, as Public Advocate Williams mentioned, New  
Yorkers who are in our care are able to exercise  
their right to vote. We believe deeply that access to  
the democratic process is an important part of civic  
participation and that eligible voters should be able  
to cast a ballot regardless of their circumstances,  
and that every vote should be able to count.

1  
2 The Department's role is to help make  
3 that access possible while respecting the legal  
4 framework that governs elections and the independent  
5 role of the Board of Elections.

6 The Department's work in this area is  
7 focused on facilitation. State election law governs  
8 most aspects of the voting process, and the Board  
9 maintains primary responsibility for election  
10 administration. Within that framework, the Department  
11 of Correction works to ensure that people who are in  
12 our care, who are eligible to vote, have access to  
13 information, registration opportunities, and the  
14 tools needed to request and submit absentee ballots.

15 We do this through a combination of  
16 education and engagement, access to forms, and  
17 operational support. Education is a key part of our  
18 approach. The Department provides nonpartisan voter  
19 education materials developed in partnership with the  
20 New York City Campaign Finance Board. And DOC staff,  
21 as well as external partners, deliver civic  
engagement programming year-round to individuals to  
help them understand eligibility rules, election  
timelines, and how to access voting resources.  
Registration drives are conducted with external

1  
2 partners, up to 16 times per year, to assist  
3 individuals in understanding and completing necessary  
4 forms. This work is intended to ensure that people in  
5 our jails have the same basic information about the  
6 voting process that they would have access to in the  
7 community.

8 Voter registration forms and absentee  
9 ballot applications are available through multiple  
10 avenues, including requests to staff, distribution  
11 during voter registration drives, and through tablets  
12 assigned to people in our care. Individuals may  
13 complete these materials independently and submit  
14 them directly to the Board, or they may request  
15 assistance from a DOC program staff, a partnering  
16 agency, or a volunteer. When individuals choose to  
17 submit materials through the Department, program  
18 staff coordinate the collection and hand delivery of  
19 voter registration forms, absentee ballot  
20 applications, and completed ballots to the Board to  
21 ensure timely processing. At the same time, we are  
careful to preserve the independence and the privacy  
of the voting process. The department does not  
influence voting decisions, does not monitor ballot

1  
2 choices, and does not interfere when individuals  
3 choose to handle their voting process independently.

4 Partnerships are central to making this  
5 work effective. We are proud of our long-standing  
6 collaboration with the Legal Aid Society and the  
7 broader Voting on Rikers Working Group, which for  
8 several years has brought together government and  
9 nonprofit partners to support voter education and  
10 registration efforts. We also partner closely with  
11 the New York City Campaign Finance Board to develop  
12 educational materials and provide staff training.  
13 More recently, the Department entered into a  
14 partnership with Empower Assist Care Network,  
15 effectively known as the EAC Network, to further  
16 expand voter education and registration outreach  
17 across facilities. Internally, we also work with  
18 Health + Hospitals or Correctional Health Services,  
19 their reentry team, who help support individuals who  
20 request assistance with forms as part of a broader  
21 reentry planning effort. These partnerships are  
critical because they help us ensure this work is  
robust, credible, and grounded in best practices,  
while also reinforcing that civic engagement work in  
correctional settings benefits from collaboration

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2 across agencies and with community-based  
3 organizations.

4 With respect to the proposed legislation  
5 before Council, the Department shares the goal of  
6 supporting voting access and transparency. At the  
7 same time, we must be mindful of the operational  
8 realities of our role and the legal structure that  
9 governs elections.

10 Regarding Intro 786, which would require  
11 the Department to facilitate ballot curing, the  
12 Department of Correction has concerns about the  
13 feasibility of implementing these requirements given  
14 our limited role in the election process. Under state  
15 law, the ballot curing process is administered  
16 directly by the Board of Elections, which  
17 communicates directly with voters using their contact  
18 information provided by the voter. The bill would  
19 appear to involve the Department of Corrections in  
20 the administration of elections, something the  
21 Department is not set up to do. The Department does  
not receive notifications of ballot deficiencies and  
does not have access to the systems that would allow  
us to identify which ballots require curing. There  
are also operational challenges related to the fluid

1  
2 nature of the jail population. Individuals may enter  
3 and leave custody with little notice, and the  
4 Department does not always have reliable forwarding  
5 contact information. Creating a parallel process that  
6 depends on the DOC receiving and redistributing cure  
7 notices would impose substantial operational  
8 difficulties. The Department remains committed to  
9 working with partners to support lawful and workable  
10 approaches to expanding access to voting and ensuring  
11 that all votes can be counted.

12  
13           Regarding Intro 797, which would require  
14 annual reporting on voter registration and voting  
15 activity. DOC already produces regular reports  
16 related to agency-based voter registration and civic  
17 engagement activities and is committed to  
18 transparency in this area.

19  
20           We look forward to continuing to work  
21 with the Council to ensure that any additional  
reporting requirements are aligned with the data the  
Department has available or is able to reliably  
collect within the scope of our facilitative role.

          By supporting civic engagement and voting  
access for eligible people who are in our care, we

1 are supporting dignity and connection to community.

2 That is a hallmark of putting people first.

3 We look forward to continuing to work  
4 with our partners, including the Council, to  
5 strengthen these efforts while respecting the legal  
6 and operational boundaries of our role.

7 Thank you for the opportunity to testify,  
8 and we are happy to answer your questions.

9 CHAIRPERSON BREWER: Thank you. First,  
10 we're going to hear from the Board of Elections on  
11 Zoom.

12 EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR RYAN: Good morning.

13 CHAIRPERSON BREWER: Good morning.

14 EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR RYAN: Everyone can  
15 hear me?

16 CHAIRPERSON BREWER: Yes.

17 EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR RYAN: All right, very  
18 good.

19 Good morning, Chair Brooks-Powers, Chair  
20 Brewer, and members of the Committees. My name is  
21 Michael J. Ryan, and I serve as the Executive  
Director of the New York City Board of Elections in  
the City of New York. Thank you for the opportunity

1  
2 to testify today regarding voting access for eligible  
3 incarcerated individuals in New York City jails.

4 I would like to emphasize the strong and  
5 longstanding partnership collectively forged between  
6 the Board and the Council. The Board greatly values  
7 this partnership and looks forward to continued  
8 collaboration with the New York City Department of  
9 Correction and various community partners.

10 The Board remains committed to ensuring  
11 that all eligible voters, including those in custody,  
12 have meaningful access to the voter franchise and are  
13 able to participate in the democratic process in full  
14 compliance with New York State Election Law. The  
15 Board shares the goals of expanding access to voting  
16 while maintaining the integrity, security, and lawful  
17 administration of elections.

18 Within the constitutional and statutory  
19 framework, it is the Board's responsibility to  
20 administer elections in the City of New York. The  
21 Department of Correction plays a critical role in  
facilitating access and communication for individuals  
eligible to vote and temporarily in custody within  
its facilities.

1  
2 Voting in New York State is an individual  
3 right based on one's residence and voter  
4 registration, not their place of temporary  
5 confinement. As a result, individuals detained on  
6 Rikers Island remain registered in their home  
7 election districts and must vote accordingly.

8 This is not merely a convenient  
9 interpretation; it is a critical safeguard to the  
10 integrity of elections, both for the individual voter  
11 and the election process generally. It ensures that  
12 individuals cast votes only in elections and  
13 districts in which they are registered, based on the  
14 address provided by the voter as their residence.  
15 This information is provided under the legal umbrella  
16 of an affidavit containing, in part, the following  
17 language: "[a]ffidavit: I swear or affirm that... the  
18 above information is true. I understand that if it is  
19 not true, I can be convicted and fined up to \$5,000  
20 and/or jailed for up to four years". This affidavit  
21 is completed by the voter and affirmed with their  
signature. The method for voting provided for  
eligible individuals in custody is absentee voting.  
The same method is used by all other voters who are

1  
2 unable to vote in person on election day or during  
3 early voting.

4           The Board works in close coordination  
5 with the Department of Correction to support these  
6 efforts. DOC facilitates access to absentee ballot  
7 applications and the collection of completed  
8 materials, while the Board is responsible for  
9 processing all applications, issuing ballots, and  
10 post-election ballot canvassing in accordance with  
11 State law. This partnership is essential to ensuring  
12 that eligible voters in custody have fair and  
13 meaningful access to the ballot.

14           The Board has engaged in ongoing  
15 collaboration with stakeholders, including the Legal  
16 Aid Society and the broader Voting in Jails  
17 Coalition, to improve awareness, coordination, and  
18 access to voting resources. These efforts have  
19 strengthened the program and reflect a shared  
20 commitment across agencies and partners.

21           To provide context on the current  
process, during the 2025 General Election:

- 621 ballots were issued to incarcerated voters citywide
- 335 ballots were received and counted
- 247 ballots were issued but not returned

- 23 ballots were returned as undeliverable
- 14 ballots were deemed invalid but curable
- One ballot was invalid and not curable
- One ballot was received past the legal deadline

For the 14 curable ballots, cure notices were issued in accordance with State law. These ballots represent a relatively small percentage of those issued; however, the Board works diligently to ensure that access to the voter franchise is provided to all voters.

The cure process is administered directly by the Board using the contact information provided by the voter. And there are important legal and operational constraints that shape this work. The Board is required to operate *strictly* within New York State Election Law, which governs voter eligibility, ballot access, and election procedures. Certain proposals, including those related to polling locations, ballot curing processes, or absentee voting requirements, are limited by State law and would require legislative action at the State level. The Board is not permitted to depart from the statutory authority or substitute its independent judgment for the law.

1  
2           Elections do not occur in a vacuum. There  
3 are 57 additional counties outside the City of New  
4 York, and the New York State Election Law, combined  
5 with rules and regulations promulgated by the New  
6 York State Board of Elections, provides the framework  
7 ensuring county-to-county consistency and preserves  
8 the overall integrity of the election process. It is  
9 essential that such a framework be maintained, as  
10 each voter has an individual right to expect that the  
11 election process will not vary based upon the  
12 particular county in which an election occurs.

13           The Board has consistently maintained  
14 that the only legally permissible manner to provide  
15 access to the voter franchise for those in custody is  
16 the absentee ballot process. The Board has  
17 communicated this legal position to the Vote NYC  
18 Jails Coalition and the Legal Aid Society of its  
19 legal position in various letters, most recently on  
20 April 16, 2024. I have attached copies of the  
21 communications for the Committees to reference.

          As the absentee ballot process remains  
the only legally permissible method to provide access  
to the voter franchise for those in custody, any  
evaluations or suggestions regarding operational

1  
2 considerations associated with and related to  
3 administering traditional poll sites within a complex  
4 correctional setting are moot. I have attached 19  
5 pages of canvassing guidance for County Boards  
6 published and promulgated by the New York State Board  
7 of Elections, which provides the framework in which  
8 we must conduct elections.

9 Another challenge is that absentee ballot  
10 applications expire at the end of each calendar year  
11 under State law, requiring voters to reapply for  
12 subsequent elections. While the Board recognizes that  
13 this can create hurdles, particularly in a custodial  
14 setting, it does not have the authority to modify.

15 Despite these constraints, the Board  
16 remains committed to working collaboratively with the  
17 Department of Correction, the City Council, and  
18 advocacy partners to strengthen the absentee voting  
19 process and improve access wherever feasible within  
20 the law.

21 Continued coordination, clear  
communication, and a shared understanding of roles  
are essential to ensuring both access and integrity  
in our elections.

1  
2 In closing, the Board appreciates the  
3 Council's attention to this issue and looks forward  
4 to continued partnership in support of eligible  
5 voters in custody and is grateful for the opportunity  
6 to testify.

7 CHAIRPERSON BREWER: Thank you very much.

8 We've been joined by Council Member  
9 Cabán.

10 I'll ask a couple of questions, and then  
11 we will turn it over to my colleague.

12 So, just starting with the Department of  
13 Correction, no "S". I keep telling people no "S" on  
14 correction. I can tell how long you have been here by  
15 whether or not you put a "S" on it.

16 So my question is-- my understanding is  
17 that, on a regular basis, I don't know what that  
18 means, there are discussions between the two  
19 agencies, as well as the Vote in NYC Jails. Twice a  
20 month, maybe?

21 So could you start at Correction, just  
talking about how often these votes, uh, these phone  
calls take place? What gets discussed? Is it a  
Working Group that works? Are there any ideas that  
come out of it that could be implemented? How could

1  
2 we improve the process as a result of these  
3 discussions?

4           You get the idea. We want to understand  
5 how this cooperation works and whether it is  
6 fruitful. Go ahead.

7           DEPUTY COMMISSIONER COLÓN: Thank you so  
8 much.

9           So just to begin, the voting on the  
10 Rikers Working Group does convene on a monthly basis.  
11 That's 12 times a year. And really, part of this  
12 partnership is our connection to legal aid and some  
13 volunteers that are also a part of this working  
14 group, who come boots to the ground, to Department of  
15 Correction facilities 16 times a year to support  
16 registration efforts.

17           On these calls, and I can even say  
18 recently, there are suggestions that we do take heed  
19 of. For example, our curriculum that was created in  
20 collaboration with the Campaign Finance Board, we  
21 recently received feedback on updates and edits that  
should go into that curriculum, so that when we're  
providing education to people who are in our care, it  
is with the most accurate and up-to-date information  
that we could possibly be giving.

1  
2           So we are grateful and thankful to our  
3 partners on the working group who provide these  
4 suggestions. And I would just highlight that  
5 Assistant Commissioner Valerie Greisokh joins these  
6 on a monthly basis. So, if you want to speak a little  
7 bit more about your experience?

8           ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER GREISOKH: Good  
9 morning. Thank you for that question.

10           Yes, those monthly conversations have  
11 been very fruitful. We've received feedback on the  
12 kinds of resources we can offer to individuals in our  
13 care, the curriculum, which we recently updated, and  
14 we collaborated on initially on development, and that  
15 we just recently updated, also the registration  
16 drives themselves, and how we're communicating to  
17 people in custody about the upcoming drives. And in  
18 our overall engagement efforts, we've made  
19 significant improvements, specifically based on the  
20 feedback from those conversations.

21           CHAIRPERSON BREWER: And when you get this  
22 curriculum or ideas, how do you communicate them to  
23 those who are detained? In other words, it's good to  
24 have it on your computer, but how do you get it out  
25 so people know about it? It's hard enough to know

1  
2 what the voting process is when you are not at  
3 Rikers, and it's even more challenging. So how do you  
4 communicate it?

5 DEPUTY COMMISSIONER COLÓN: Thank you.

6 There are a few methods of communication.  
7 Just to start with technology, because you mentioned  
8 computers, it is available on our tablets. So just to  
9 begin, there are those who have a tablet; they do  
10 have access to this material on the tablet. But when  
11 it comes to where I think the biggest driver of this  
12 information being provided to people is through  
13 personal engagement, like in-person, person-to-person  
14 conversations. So mentioning, or going back to those  
15 16 voter registration drives, that are critical, that  
16 canvas multiple facilities; although, one facility is  
17 specifically targeted each event, uh, there is  
18 person-to-person interaction that does go into the  
19 education materials and guides people on various  
20 aspects of voting. And then we have also trained all  
21 of our counseling team members. And so that is the  
critical component of how we do this as a  
departmental agency, which is that we ensure, on a  
quarterly basis, our Counseling Services Unit  
facilitates and uses these materials to ensure that

1  
2 people are aware of the latest trends with voting,  
3 but also are just generally aware of access to vote  
4 and how to vote in a nonpartisan way.

5 CHAIRPERSON BREWER: Now, I believe there  
6 are very few volunteers who come on a regular basis,  
7 like three or four. So my question is, are they able  
8 to go to all the different units? Do they only get to  
9 go to one unit? How do they get around? It's not like  
10 you're in, you know, one facility upstate, not the  
11 prisons, but the jails and counties might just be  
12 one, but we have many more. So, how does one travel  
13 from one unit to the other? How do you decide where  
14 they go? Because they do complain that they don't get  
15 to go to as many units as they would like.

16 DEPUTY COMMISSIONER COLÓN: Thank you for  
17 that question.

18 So for each of the voter registration  
19 drives, they go to specifically one facility. Those  
20 facilities do rotate during every single drive. So  
21 it's not like they're going to the same facility  
every single month or every single voter registration  
drive. And when they are in that facility, they are  
only able to see a subset of housing units. They  
typically are not able to go to all housing units

1  
2 within that site. And I think to recognize and  
3 mitigate that, because we realize that's a real  
4 challenge, if they're only going to a subset of  
5 housing units, then how do we get this information to  
6 everyone? Which is where, for our Counseling Services  
7 staff, we try to have them go to the large majority  
8 of all housing units, if not all housing units, on  
9 that quarterly basis to provide that information.

10 And I think, even in this notion of  
11 recognizing there still might be a gap, in 2026, we  
12 began to engage with the EAC Network who will be  
13 coming in twice a week and supporting the further  
14 rotation of housing units that may not have been  
15 touched on those voter registration drives, so that  
16 we have continuing engagement, continuing access in a  
17 person to person conversation, for registration  
18 forms, and then continuing education.

19 CHAIRPERSON BREWER: Okay. And you'll  
20 track that? Having a new Commissioner helps, a  
21 fabulous new Commissioner. So, how do you track? I  
know what the volunteers are doing, but how do you  
track what your program staff is doing to know that  
they're actually doing this? Because they have other  
jobs, too.

1  
2 DEPUTY COMMISSIONER COLÓN: Yes. So we do  
3 have a program's data tracker. That data tracker is  
4 where we enter, for the Counseling Services Unit, all  
5 of their programming efforts. And that would be under  
6 our civic engagement curriculum, where we do track  
7 that information when they do facilitate that.

8 And then, as for our partnership that we  
9 have recently started with EAC Network, that will  
10 also be tracked using our data tracking methods, so  
11 we know who we engaged with. And just broadly  
12 speaking, when we are doing our voter registration  
13 drives, or we're doing any collecting of voter  
14 registration forms or absentee ballot request forms,  
15 we do also track who we engage with, and who we gave  
16 forms to, or received forms back.

17 CHAIRPERSON BREWER: Okay. Thank you.

18 Mr. Ryan, my question is, according to  
19 the League of Women Voters, no one from the Board of  
20 Elections has attended—and they go—the League of  
21 Women Voters goes—any of those meetings that I just  
described, those monthly meetings since October 25,  
A. Is that true? And if so, why did the Board of  
Elections stop attending?

1  
2 EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR RYAN: Perhaps, but  
3 starting in October 2025, we were preparing for a  
4 gubernatorial election. I do know this, our staff and  
5 our point person are in regular contact with the  
6 Department of Correction. So while we might not be  
7 attending a formal meeting from time to time,  
8 depending on the needs of attending to elections, we  
9 are in regular communication with the staff that's  
10 doing this work with the Department of Correction.

11 CHAIRPERSON BREWER: Okay, but in the  
12 future, would you assign somebody to participate in  
13 these monthly meetings?

14 EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR RYAN: Yes, as staff is  
15 available.

16 CHAIRPERSON BREWER: But you have plenty  
17 of staff, Sir. I'm just saying, I hope-- I think it  
18 would be... (CROSS-TALK)

19 EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR RYAN: (INAUDIBLE) I  
20 will tell you that, the lead up to elections...

21 CHAIRPERSON BREWER: Okay.

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR RYAN: The elections  
are an all-hands-on-deck process.

CHAIRPERSON BREWER: All right.

1  
2 EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR RYAN: And sometimes,  
3 not all the time, but sometimes, administrative  
4 meetings have to be set aside for the purposes of  
5 conducting an election. But certainly, we've attended  
6 many of them, and we're committed to the process.

7 CHAIRPERSON BREWER: Okay. All right.  
8 Thank you very much.

9 Can you help me again? You talked about  
10 the election last year, and 621 ballots, 335  
11 received, et cetera. In the very end, maybe some were  
12 cured—the 14. But how many people, out of the 621,  
13 who are housed at Rikers, actually were able to vote?  
14 Maybe I missed it.

15 EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR RYAN: Uh, 335.

16 CHAIRPERSON BREWER: So they were actually  
17 able to vote out of the 621 of those...

18 EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR RYAN: Right...

19 CHAIRPERSON BREWER: Okay.

20 EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR RYAN: Received and  
21 counted, yes.

22 CHAIRPERSON BREWER: Okay. So my question  
23 is, that's obviously, you know, 621 is not a lot, 335  
24 if you're talking, I don't know, say, 5,000 people.  
25 If you're giving the benefit of the doubt to the 20%

1  
2 or so who are not able to vote on Rikers, what do you  
3 suggest? I know you don't like the polling place. I  
4 like the polling place. I'm going to talk about it.  
5 But what else do you suggest we can do to increase  
6 the number when thousands are eligible?

7 I understand all the problems. People  
8 leave, they go upstate, or they don't know the  
9 process. But do you have some suggestions, in  
10 addition to what happens now, as to how we can get  
11 these numbers up?

12 EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR RYAN: So, just for a  
13 clarification, as a lawyer, I like the law, and we  
14 believe that we're following the law.

15 With respect to upping the numbers, just  
16 to give you some context, while there was only a 54%  
17 return rate on the absentee ballots, for example, in  
18 2025, in the general population, there was only a 73%  
19 return rate for absentee ballots. So it's off the  
20 mark, but a lot of people don't return their ballots,  
21 whether they're held in custody or not.

22 With respect to the distribution process  
23 on Rikers Island, I would defer to the Department of  
24 Correction to help us with information that  
25 identifies these voters, and we will process anything

1  
2 that we receive. When you consider that number 5,000,  
3 while it's a lot, we received for the general  
4 election last year, including the Department of  
5 Correction, over 235,000 absentee ballot  
6 applications, and all of them were processed without  
7 issues.

8 So an additional 3,000 to 5,000 number is  
9 not going to be something that upsets the process  
10 from the Board of Elections side.

11 CHAIRPERSON BREWER: No, we want more  
12 people to vote for sure. But do you send, from the  
13 Board of Elections, anybody to register or pre-  
14 register voters at Rikers?

15 EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR RYAN: No, the City  
16 Charter. We rely on the requirements of the City  
17 Charter, which mandates the Department of Correction  
18 to do that.

19 CHAIRPERSON BREWER: All right, so it's  
20 either volunteers or people from the Department of  
21 Correction, no "S", right? I'm just reminding  
everybody of... (CROSS-TALK)

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR RYAN: Yes, no, S.

CHAIRPERSON BREWER: No, S.

1  
2 EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR RYAN: I work for the  
3 City and the State, they add the S (INAUDIBLE)...

4 (CROSS-TALK)

5 CHAIRPERSON BREWER: I know, so I'm just  
6 making sure there's no S on it. I'm just neurotic  
7 about that.

8 EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR RYAN: (LAUGHS)

9 CHAIRPERSON BREWER: My final question is,  
10 I'm still focused on the polling place. So you have  
11 Cook County, apparently, and apparently Washington  
12 D.C., apparently, Colorado, I assume they have some  
13 technology that goes with the polling place. Because  
14 they have the same problem. Cook County is pretty  
15 big. They have people from different  
16 parts—Southside, Northside, whatever—Chicago. They  
17 apparently, I don't know for sure, because I haven't  
18 checked, have the opportunity to have people at a  
19 polling place.

20 So my question is, do you think, maybe  
21 not today, because we all want to be able to vote in  
different locations, I know that's a goal. But do you  
think there is technology out there to be able to try  
to "disengage", would be the word, so that people  
could know which AD they're in? Is there some

1  
2 technology out there that is fairly close to making  
3 that possible?

4 EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR RYAN: So just for  
5 starters, and I have to reiterate, New York State  
6 Election Law 8-400, sets out the process for absentee  
7 voting as a substitute for individuals who, for  
8 whatever reason... (CROSS-TALK)

9 CHAIRPERSON BREWER: Correct.

10 EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR RYAN: cannot get...  
11 (CROSS-TALK)

12 CHAIRPERSON BREWER: Yes.

13 EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR RYAN: to the poll  
14 site.

15 CHAIRPERSON BREWER: Yes.

16 EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR RYAN: So we have to  
17 follow that law right now as it sits. And that is the  
18 clear guidance that we have received from the State  
19 Board of Elections.

20 CHAIRPERSON BREWER: Okay.

21 EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR RYAN: But, Council  
Member Brewer, one of the other challenges is that we  
have to set the ballots up by election district and  
assembly districts. So let's assume you are  
successful in persuading your fellow legislators in

1  
2 the State to make an amendment to the election law  
3 that allows for that to occur for people who are  
4 incarcerated. When you have a fluid population like  
5 the population that's on Rikers Island, that is going  
6 to be a challenge to make sure that we have the right  
7 ballots at the location for, you know, for people--  
8 to be available for people to vote on. One that we,  
9 quite frankly, have not explored. But I can give you  
10 the assurances that if the law provides us with a  
11 directive, we will operationally work on that  
12 directive and make the changes necessary to  
13 accomplish a legal goal.

14 CHAIRPERSON BREWER: Thank you very much,  
15 Sir. I'm like a dog with a bone, you know that.

16 EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR RYAN: (LAUGHS)

17 CHAIRPERSON BREWER: I now turn it over to  
18 my colleague.

19 CHAIRPERSON BROOKS-POWERS: Thank you,  
20 Chair, and thank you to both agencies for their  
21 testimony.

I just want to reiterate to the  
Department of Correction, in particular, that we  
request all testimony to be submitted no less than 24  
hours in advance. This is the second time I'm

1  
2 publicly requesting that, and I would really  
3 appreciate your partnership on that.

4 So, going into logistics of the voting  
5 process, uh, and this is going to be for the  
6 Department of Correction, it is our understanding  
7 that there is only a single individual responsible  
8 for ensuring that all the voter registration forms,  
9 absentee, and early ballot-- early mail-in ballot  
10 request forms, and absentee ballots are delivered to  
11 the Board of Elections. Is that correct?

12 DEPUTY COMMISSIONER COLÓN: Thank you for  
13 the question.

14 So in history, because I'm saying this in  
15 2026, the landscape is changing, but historically,  
16 yes, we have had a single person identified. But I do  
17 just want to say that while this single person, their  
18 role and responsibility is around civic engagement,  
19 they don't work in a vacuum. They work on a team. And  
20 so there is a team around them that includes an  
21 executive director, a deputy director, and they also  
work in partnership with our Counseling Services  
Team. That can be upwards of 60 staff at any given  
time. So I do want to say that while it's one person  
that has the primary responsibility, and their job

1  
2 duty, and job function, there is a team that  
3 surrounds them. And I would say then, for the  
4 landscape changing in 2026, and recognizing having a  
5 single person responsible for some of this, could be  
6 a challenge.

7 And while not working in a vacuum and on  
8 a team, there might still need to be more support;  
9 that really is where we went into a contractual  
10 partnership with a partnering agency. Because we  
11 recognize that there needs to be more people who are  
12 supporting the pickup and delivery of forms, and  
13 having this be a sole responsibility or duty.

14 CHAIRPERSON BROOKS-POWERS: Thank you for  
15 that.

16 And how often does that main person  
17 deliver materials to the Board of Elections?

18 DEPUTY COMMISSIONER COLÓN: Thank you for  
19 that question.

20 I believe, quite frankly, that it  
21 depends, but we have set up regular distribution or  
collection to the Board of Elections. And I would  
just ask for my colleague, Valerie Greisokh, to give  
the definitive answer.

1  
2 ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER GREISOKH: Yes, we  
3 have a close partnership with the BOE to deliver  
4 voter registration forms. For example, after a voter  
5 registration drive during the election, once we  
6 receive completed ballots, we deliver them to the  
7 BOE. So that process is ongoing.

8 CHAIRPERSON BROOKS-POWERS: Okay. And so  
9 you would say during the election season, it is done  
10 a bit more often?

11 ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER GREISOKH: Yes.

12 CHAIRPERSON BROOKS-POWERS: Okay.

13 Have they received any training from the  
14 Board of Elections, the Campaign Finance Board, or  
15 the Civic Engagement Commission on best practices for  
16 filling out voter registration forms, absentee or  
17 early mail ballot requests, or absentee ballots?

18 DEPUTY COMMISSIONER COLÓN: Yes, and I am  
19 also going to hand it over to my partner, Valerie  
20 Greisokh, to describe that in more detail.

21 ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER GREISOKH: Yes. We  
22 have a strong partnership with the New York Campaign  
23 Finance Board, and they have provided training to our  
24 counseling staff and to our counseling supervisors.

1  
2 They just recently trained and provided updated  
3 training to the supervisors on best practices.

4 CHAIRPERSON BROOKS-POWERS: How does the  
5 Department learn about upcoming elections?

6 ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER GREISOKH: We work  
7 very closely with the BOE and with our partners to  
8 make sure that we have all the up-to-date information  
9 and that information is made available to our staff  
10 as well as to the people in our care.

11 CHAIRPERSON BROOKS-POWERS: Is someone  
12 responsible for keeping track of when the elections  
13 occur, and is it done through the collaboration with  
14 the Board of Elections? Are you depending primarily  
15 on BOE?

16 ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER GREISOKH: Yes, we  
17 work very closely with the BOE and with our partners.  
18 And part of the benefit of having these monthly calls  
19 is that we're able to always stay in communication  
20 and receive updates about any upcoming elections.

21 DEPUTY COMMISSIONER COLÓN: And I would  
just emphasize, I think having the person with the  
sole responsibility of civic engagement, like this,  
is part of their role and duty is to make sure that  
we're on top of this as an agency.

1  
2 CHAIRPERSON BROOKS-POWERS: Thank you for  
3 that. And how do you handle registering voters for  
4 special elections?

5 DEPUTY COMMISSIONER COLÓN: Like the  
6 process in general?

7 CHAIRPERSON BROOKS-POWERS: Yeah.

8 DEPUTY COMMISSIONER COLÓN: Okay...

9 (CROSS-TALK)

10 CHAIRPERSON BROOKS-POWERS:  
11 (UNINTELLIGIBLE). I was elected in a special  
12 election, so I'm curious how that's handled. It  
13 happened so quickly.

14 DEPUTY COMMISSIONER COLÓN: Do you want to  
15 dive into the details for special election?

16 ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER GREISOKH: Yeah.  
17 So, for any individual in custody who requested a  
18 ballot, the BOE will provide us with a ballot for  
19 that individual if there were to be a special  
20 election. And then we will follow up directly with  
21 that person to help them complete it.

22 CHAIRPERSON BROOKS-POWERS: And how do you  
23 ensure the correct voters apply and receive ballots  
24 for special elections that occur in districts that  
25 they vote within?

1  
2 ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER GREISOKH: So on  
3 the absentee ballot request form, they put their  
4 address, and it's my understanding that's the address  
5 that the BOE would use to determine if that person  
6 should receive a ballot for the special election.  
Uh...

7 CHAIRPERSON BROOKS-POWERS: So, walk me  
8 through this a little bit. So I'll use myself as the  
9 case in point. So, the 31st Council District covers  
10 parts of Southeast Queens. I have a constituent who  
11 is housed on Rikers, and it's noticed. How is the  
12 Department of Correction making that connection to  
that eligible voter to notify them that there's a  
special election happening?

13 DEPUTY COMMISSIONER COLÓN: I think just  
14 to like, emphasize, so people-- part of our regular  
15 ongoing process is that people are completing both  
16 voter registration forms and are also completing, as  
17 mentioned on an annual basis, or as applicable on an  
annual basis, the absentee ballot form request.

18 So when that information or that address  
19 has been highlighted and notified to the Board of  
20 Elections, that's when we would become aware that  
21 there is a person who would be in that district. But

1  
2 then, not to negate, I think they're not I think--  
3 there are absolutely times where we get information  
4 on a special election, and then we are speaking to  
5 people about that through our education practices.  
6 So, for doing our educational counseling sessions or  
7 programming sessions using our curriculum, we do  
8 speak about special elections. And then we can  
9 highlight or emphasize if there is a special election  
10 that is currently occurring.

11 CHAIRPERSON BROOKS-POWERS: But that's  
12 more general, right? So, like if there's an actual  
13 election underway, because again, the runway is so  
14 short, like my election was like February 19th, and  
15 it was noticed in January. So that's a quick  
16 turnaround for a place like Rikers that has layers to  
17 it.

18 So, is there a system in place to make  
19 sure that they are being notified in a timely manner?

20 DEPUTY COMMISSIONER COLÓN: It would be  
21 upon receipt of us being aware that someone would be  
in that someone would be in that district.

CHAIRPERSON BROOKS-POWERS: So you would  
depend on the BOE to notify you...

1  
2 DEPUTY COMMISSIONER COLÓN: On the Board  
3 of Election? Yes, primarily to notify us that  
4 somebody would be in that district, and that is under  
5 the assumption that they would have had an absentee  
6 ballot form request having been submitted from Rikers  
7 Island.

8 So I think, to your point, it does get a  
9 bit tricky if there's somebody in our custody who did  
10 not submit an absentee ballot form request while they  
11 were in our custody that was then submitted to the  
12 Board of Elections, if that's what we're trying to  
13 get to.

14 CHAIRPERSON BREWER: Can I just have one  
15 question: Technology, technology, technology, you  
16 come in, I know, we all know, lots of people come  
17 into Rikers, we know them personally. Is there some  
18 way in 2026 that their address could be collaborated,  
19 coordinated with the AD and the ED, literally, so  
20 that if there is an election, you would tell them?  
21 Is that something that-- believe me, that's possible.  
Is that something we could consider doing?

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER COLÓN: We will  
absolutely look into it, and I do think that  
technology... (CROSS-TALK)

1

CHAIRPERSON BREWER: AI in two seconds...

2

(CROSS-TALK)

3

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER COLÓN: Yep.

4

Technology is critical.

5

CHAIRPERSON BREWER: Thank you.

6

CHAIRPERSON BROOKS-POWERS: No, thank you  
for that.

7

8

And in line with Chair Brewer, how are  
you all tracking individuals who have filled out the  
registration form, or early mail or absentee ballot  
request forms? And do you feel the tracking is robust  
enough to ensure delivery to a person who has been  
moved from, for example, a different unit or  
facility?

10

11

12

13

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER COLÓN: Yes. So what  
we know is who we have distributed voter registration  
forms to and who has given them back to us, and then,  
therefore, who we have delivered them to the Board of  
Elections.

14

15

16

17

18

19

20

So we are aware if we do receive a form  
from a person, a specific person that is like an  
absentee ballot request form, and therefore if we  
then received the absentee ballot to give to them, we  
would be aware of who that person was, uh, for us to

21

1  
2 be able to then locate them and provide them with  
3 their absentee ballot form.

4 CHAIRPERSON BROOKS-POWERS: Now, what  
5 steps do you take when a person requests an early  
6 mail or absentee ballot while in custody, but the  
7 ballot is distributed after the person has been  
8 released from custody?

9 DEPUTY COMMISSIONER COLÓN: So it is our  
10 practice that if we receive an absentee ballot and  
11 somebody has been released, we would mail that to the  
12 person.

13 CHAIRPERSON BROOKS-POWERS: Okay.

14 Pivoting to coordinating with volunteers.  
15 The Vote in NYC Jails coalition comes to Rikers  
16 Island about twice a month to register voters and  
17 help incarcerated individuals fill out their absentee  
18 ballots. Volunteers have told us that they're only  
19 allowed to register voters in a facility selected by  
20 DOC officials.

21 How do you decide which facility  
volunteers are allowed to register voters in?

And I have a couple more questions  
(UNINTELLIGIBLE) now. I'll just pause there.

1  
2 DEPUTY COMMISSIONER COLÓN: Yeah, so to  
3 the best extent, we rotate each of our facilities to  
4 make sure that there is equal access. So that would  
5 be on rotation. And at times, there have been days  
6 when we are planning for a voter registration drive  
7 in a jail and end up pivoting to a different facility  
8 or site.

9 CHAIRPERSON BROOKS-POWERS: And to that  
10 point, I've heard that at times the registration is  
11 happening on one facility at a time as a rotation.  
12 Which, to me, is concerning, because that means that  
13 there are several other facilities not getting the  
14 same access.

15 And what is the rationale for DOC not  
16 allowing the registration to take place at each of  
17 the facilities? And I know often the DOC likes to  
18 limit the amount of visitors, just in terms of this  
19 is, you know, these folks are residents, but they're  
20 in different facilities. So it's not like if five  
21 people are here and five people are there, like it's  
an overlap. So, what is the rationale that two  
facilities, three facilities, all facilities can  
conduct the registration process at the same time on  
the same schedule?

1  
2 DEPUTY COMMISSIONER COLÓN: Yeah. I mean,  
3 I don't think that the rationale is to try to limit  
4 the other facilities. But it is due to the efficiency  
5 of resources, quite frankly. And so when we're  
6 bringing in volunteers who are not-- at times, some  
7 people do come regularly every single drive. And then  
8 we do have folks who are here for the first time  
9 coming into Rikers. And when we're clearing them to  
10 come into our facility, we do have a dedicated team  
11 that escorts them into the facility and brings them  
12 to the dedicated areas. So that can be  
13 resource-intensive to be doing that at multiple sites  
14 at the exact same time. Not to say it's impossible,  
15 just to say it's resource-intensive. So, take heed of  
16 the suggestion. I do think it's something we can  
17 look into.

18 CHAIRPERSON BREWER: I just want to say  
19 that Delise Albert Camus (phonetic) from France was  
20 visiting with us today. Merci beaucoup. Okay, thank  
21 you.

(LAUGHTER)

CHAIRPERSON BROOKS-POWERS: Uhm, has the  
Vote in New York City Jails Coalition been allowed in  
every facility in Rikers?

1  
2 DEPUTY COMMISSIONER COLÓN: Let us  
3 confirm. Valerie, can you share?

4 CHAIRPERSON BROOKS-POWERS: Okay.

5 ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER GREISOKH: Yes,  
6 (INAUDIBLE) has been going to all the facilities  
7 throughout the year.

8 CHAIRPERSON BROOKS-POWERS: So they've  
9 been to every one? Have they been to each one?

10 ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER GREISOKH: They've  
11 been to all the facilities throughout the year.

12 CHAIRPERSON BROOKS-POWERS: Thank you.  
13 What's the frequency? So, how often are the  
14 volunteers allowed in each of the units at Rikers?

15 DEPUTY COMMISSIONER COLÓN: So we do 16  
16 drives a year. And again, I think that that's where  
17 we have even acknowledged that 16 times a year  
18 rotating to one facility, which might mean that a  
19 facility gets a touch point twice a year, uh, if  
20 we're rotating, that there could be more, which is  
21 why we have really intentionally wanted to dedicate  
resources to a twice a week model, uh, where we have  
a partnering agency coming in two times a week.

But, as it pertains to the Working Group  
and to volunteers, it is 16 times a year. Which,

1  
2 broadly speaking, is like once a month, maybe twice a  
3 month during specific months.

4 CHAIRPERSON BROOKS-POWERS: So, before  
5 each election, has every unit in every facility been  
6 visited at least once?

7 DEPUTY COMMISSIONER COLÓN: I think we can  
8 say pretty confidently that every unit has been  
9 visited by a DOC staff member, specifically a  
10 Counseling Services Unit member, because of the  
11 quarterly educational drives that we do try to  
12 partner around the times of election cycles as well,  
13 when they're delivering that material. And so they  
14 would have received information on how to access  
15 registration forms and absentee ballot forms through  
16 that educational process.

17 But as it pertains to ensuring that the  
18 volunteers and advocates can touch every single  
19 housing unit, you know, by November or by June, I  
20 think it would be hard for us to say that the  
21 volunteers have gone to every single housing unit.

CHAIRPERSON BROOKS-POWERS: Thank you.

We have been joined by Council Member  
Salaam.

1  
2 I'm gonna pivot to the Board of  
3 Elections. Wanting to focus on innovations to  
4 increase voter participation.

5 Advocates have repeatedly requested that  
6 the voters at Rikers be provided with greater access  
7 to the vote. These mechanisms have included a polling  
8 place at the facility and a program similar to that  
9 provided to nursing home residents.

10 Can you explain how nursing home  
11 residents vote?

12 EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR RYAN: Nursing home  
13 residents vote again under the umbrella of New York  
14 State election law. There are thresholds based on the  
15 number of individuals who reside in a particular  
16 nursing home. The number is escaping me off the top  
17 of my head. But suffice it to say, not all nursing  
18 homes get this particular service. We do it under New  
19 York State election law.

20 But when they meet the threshold, we send  
21 in bipartisan teams to the nursing home, in  
coordination with whatever their executive staff is,  
usually an executive director. And then we provide  
the absentee materials to the individuals who are in  
the nursing home. They vote on those materials, we

1  
2 collect them back, and bring them back to our borough  
3 offices.

4 CHAIRPERSON BROOKS-POWERS: What are the  
5 obstacles to implementing a program similar to the  
6 nursing home voting program for incarcerated  
7 individuals at Rikers?

8 EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR RYAN: Well, one of the  
9 main practical considerations is, and I'm going to  
10 put on my former Mayor's Office hat when I used to  
11 oversee the Department of Correction, is the  
12 disparate number of facilities. And you won't know,  
13 with the exception of, say, the facility that houses  
14 juveniles or the facility that houses females, which  
15 is one and one, the other ones all have, you know,  
16 could be spread out all over the island. And then  
17 that would be a substantial coordination with the  
18 Department of Correction to be able to make sure that  
19 if this responsibility is going to be taken on by  
20 these two agencies, that we can do it responsibly and  
21 that we can do it ensuring that the voters get their  
ballots.

22 CHAIRPERSON BROOKS-POWERS: Now, when we  
23 transition fully to the borough-based jails,  
24 considering-- I mean, it'll still be spread out,  
25

1  
2 it'll be multiple facilities, but you'll have four  
3 boroughs, particularly that will house individuals in  
4 custody.

5 Do you think that would address some of  
6 the concerns that you have in that way?

7 EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR RYAN: Well, certainly  
8 I'm familiar with, very familiar with the location  
9 that was chosen in Downtown Brooklyn, because it used  
10 to be the Brooklyn House that was then raised, and  
11 now is being built as a new jail, in a high rise jail  
12 facility, where all persons in custody are in one  
13 place, that certainly would be an automatic  
14 streamlining of the process. And then we would have  
15 to work something out with the Department of  
16 Correction to make sure that we could have access.  
17 It's a conversation certainly worth having.

18 But can I also add that one of the ways  
19 that we streamlined the process was that it came to  
20 our attention several years ago that the staff, the  
21 DOC staff, who were working on this, would  
individually go to all of the five borough offices to  
pick up the voting materials. What we have done in  
partnership with DOC is we have everything sent to  
the Queens location presently since the work is

1  
2 occurring on Rikers Island and the DOC staff was in  
3 Queens.

4 So there has been some streamlining that  
5 was done. We're certainly open to conversations about  
6 what further streamlining we can do in order to make  
7 sure that this process works more effectively.

8 CHAIRPERSON BROOKS-POWERS: Thank you. I'm  
9 going to yield on my questions, and I have a round  
10 two, Madam Chair.

11 CHAIRPERSON BREWER: Absolutely.

12 So first, we're going to hear from  
13 Council Members Morano, Narcisse, and Cabán. I know  
14 Cabán has to leave, but these other folks were here  
15 first. Go ahead.

16 COUNCIL MEMBER MORANO: Thank you, Chairs.  
17 Absolutely.

18 I'll begin with Correction if there's  
19 time for the Board of Elections as well.

20 Just to drill down on feasibility, which  
21 I know both chairs asked you a bit about. You  
22 testified that you don't receive ballot deficiency  
23 notices and don't have system access.

24 So how exactly are you supposed to  
25 implement ballot curing under this bill, Intro 786?

1  
2 DEPUTY COMMISSIONER COLÓN: Well, I think  
3 that, uh, kind of as a response to that, since ballot  
4 curing does align with the Board of Elections and  
5 their process and state law, in order for us to  
6 implement this legislation around curing, we would  
7 need to have further conversations with the Law  
8 Department. There would need to be state legislative  
9 changes, as mentioned by the Board of Elections, and  
10 to really identify our legal boundaries as a  
11 department.

12 COUNCIL MEMBER MORANO: How many people in  
13 DOC custody actually voted in the last election? Not  
14 registered, not eligible, but actually voted?

15 DEPUTY COMMISSIONER COLÓN: That would be  
16 a question for the Board of Elections.

17 COUNCIL MEMBER MORANO: All right, I'll  
18 come back to them in a second.

19 You say you don't interfere with the  
20 ballots, but you collect and deliver them. What are  
21 the safeguards to ensure integrity in that process?

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER COLÓN: Thank you.  
Well, I think first and foremost, it's ensuring that  
our staff are trained on the process and are trained

1  
2 on ensuring that people have privacy and making  
3 independent choices that are nonpartisan.

4 So any communication that we would be  
5 having is literally to deliver and also to then  
6 indicate or try to reduce any challenges like signing  
7 an envelope that would result in something needing to  
8 be cured, but would have nothing to do with the  
9 actual filling out of the document of the ballot.

10 COUNCIL MEMBER MORANO: Given the fluid  
11 population and unreliable contact information, which  
12 is just par for the course, isn't it likely that many  
13 ballots might simply fall through the cracks?

14 DEPUTY COMMISSIONER COLÓN: That would be  
15 hard for us to speculate, but I think with a fluid  
16 population, it would be hard for us to give a  
17 definitive answer on that.

18 COUNCIL MEMBER MORANO: Sure.

19 In terms of the education and access  
20 process, you mentioned 16 registration drives per  
21 year and educational materials. You've described  
inputs, education forms, and outreach. In terms of  
the conversion rate from registration to actual  
ballots cast, can you speak to that?

1  
2 DEPUTY COMMISSIONER COLÓN: Yeah. So  
3 typically we see registration numbers to be higher,  
4 and this is what we would know based on what somebody  
5 is handing back to us. And I would just like to also  
6 address or say formally, you know, people do have the  
7 autonomy to be able to mail this in directly. But  
8 what we have, and I don't have a conversion rate for  
9 you directly, uh, we could get back to you on that,  
10 is that typically there are higher numbers of voter  
11 registration than there are people actually asking  
12 for an absentee ballot form.

COUNCIL MEMBER MORANO: Great.

11 And I'll spend my last minute or two on  
12 Mr. Ryan.

13 Mr. Ryan, if the Council wants to get  
14 this right, what's the most important thing we should  
15 do to support the Board of Elections in making this  
16 system actually work?

16 EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR RYAN: Well, with  
17 respect to Intro 786, since we don't have any  
18 involvement in 797, the most effective way is to  
19 submit a resolution to the State legislature so that  
20 the State can incorporate this into the statutory  
21

1  
2 framework, so that we would have the legal authority  
3 to implement any changes.

4 With respect to-- if the law doesn't  
5 change, what we could do is what we've been  
6 discussing, which is to enhance communication with  
7 the Board of Elections and the Department of  
8 Correction.

9 I don't necessarily think that there's  
10 legislative action that's necessary to do that. I  
11 think that it can be reported back in these oversight  
12 hearings, and we should be held to the test, that our  
13 deeds match our words, and that we are working to  
14 improve the process.

15 COUNCIL MEMBER MORANO: So would you agree  
16 here that the goal should be not just access to a  
17 ballot, but a realistic opportunity for that ballot  
18 to be counted?

19 EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR RYAN: Yes. And I  
20 think, in light of your question earlier to DOC,  
21 there were 621 ballots requested, 335 were returned  
and counted. So while that represents a 54% margin,  
in the general election, with the general population,  
that margin was 73%.

1  
2           So there's always going to be a drop off  
3 between the number that are requested and the number  
4 that are actually voted. For whatever reason, people  
5 do request absentee ballots and don't always return  
6 them. (TIMER)

7           I will say that the return rate has  
8 spiked somewhat after the state legislature passed  
9 the early mail ballot legislation. Because you no  
10 longer had to have an absolute excuse for not  
11 voting-- you could apply for an early mail ballot,  
12 and that seems to be new people coming into that  
13 process. Of course, those incarcerated in Rikers  
14 Island would have been eligible either way.

15           COUNCIL MEMBER MORANO: Thank you.

16           CHAIRPERSON BREWER: Thank you very much,  
17 Council Member Narcisse, and Council Member Cabán.

18           COUNCIL MEMBER NARCISSE: I yield to my  
19 colleague Cabán since she has to go.

20           CHAIRPERSON BREWER: You're too nice.

21           COUNCIL MEMBER CABÁN: That's so nice.

(LAUGHTER)

          COUNCIL MEMBER CABÁN: It's because we  
matched today, right?

1

2

COUNCIL MEMBER NARCISSE: I'm a nurse,  
so...

3

(LAUGHTER)

4

5

COUNCIL MEMBER CABÁN: I love that you got  
the pink going.

6

Good morning.

7

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER COLÓN: Good morning.

8

9

COUNCIL MEMBER CABÁN: I just want to ask  
a couple of data questions before I dig into some of  
my other questions, but we're looking at a current  
census that's above 6,000, right?

10

11

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER COLÓN: Yes, our  
census is about 6,700.

12

COUNCIL MEMBER CABÁN: Okay.

13

14

15

16

17

And then out of that number, how many are  
eligible to vote? The vast majority are eligible to  
vote. Because either you have to be on post, like on  
some sort of supervision, or on posts, or you  
wouldn't be on Rikers, like the vast majority of  
people are eligible to correct?

18

19

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER COLÓN: Yeah. We don't  
have the exact number for who's eligible to vote.

20

21

COUNCIL MEMBER CABÁN: But would you say  
that it is the vast majority?

1  
2 DEPUTY COMMISSIONER COLÓN: We could  
3 speculate that it could be the vast majority.

4 COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: And then from the  
5 BOE numbers, we saw that just around 600 requested  
6 and around 300 returned ballots, correct?

7 DEPUTY COMMISSIONER COLÓN: (UN-MIC'D)  
8 (INAUDIBLE)

9 COUNCIL MEMBER CABÁN: Yeah, we're just  
10 going to say, yes, that-- I just want to get on the  
11 record that there's a large population here that are  
12 eligible to vote, who are not even requesting a  
13 ballot.

14 I know that you guys know this, but I was  
15 a former defender. One of the things that I did  
16 after, uh, and during or before allocating my client,  
17 was to remind them that they retain their right to  
18 vote. And the vast-- *the vast majority* of cases,  
19 because our clients don't know that. And so I think  
20 that there's a lot of room for improvement. And this  
21 is something that the coalition has been working  
towards for years and years. And we haven't seen as  
much improvement as we would like. So I think that's  
the basis for legislation here to really pick up  
those numbers.

1  
2           Given that opened absentee ballots are  
3 not counted by the BOE, does DOC have a specific  
4 policy regarding opening mail that's labeled as an  
5 absentee ballot?

6           DEPUTY COMMISSIONER COLÓN: We would not  
7 be opening their mail. But when we do these drives,  
8 if we do receive a ballot, that would be specific to  
9 go to somebody, we would forward it to the mailing  
10 address that we're aware of.

11           COUNCIL MEMBER CABÁN: Okay.

12           How many days on average does it take for  
13 mail that has been delivered to Rikers to reach the  
14 intended recipient, if the person is still in custody  
15 and they requested that ballot?

16           DEPUTY COMMISSIONER COLÓN: So we work  
17 closely with the Board of Elections. And it's  
18 actually like a hand delivery process where we would  
19 be picking up those forms on a designated and  
20 agreed-upon date. And then we would be distributing  
21 them thereafter, right after. And then we would be,  
as we receive them back, bringing them back to the  
Board of Elections.

          COUNCIL MEMBER CABÁN: Yeah...

1  
2 DEPUTY COMMISSIONER COLÓN: So it's  
literally a hand-to-hand... (CROSS-TALK)

3 COUNCIL MEMBER CABÁN: So would you say it  
4 happens-- I just want to get more specifics on the  
5 record.

6 You're saying that it gets picked up at  
7 the BOE and then given out by hand, but does that  
happen the same day? Like, what's the amount of time  
8 in between it getting picked up and it making it to  
9 the person who's requested the ballot?

10 DEPUTY COMMISSIONER COLÓN: It could  
11 really vary. It could be the same day, or it could be  
within that week.

12 COUNCIL MEMBER CABÁN: Okay.

13 I would love, yeah, I would love to  
14 figure out how we-- I mean, the difference also of a  
15 week, is it maybe the difference of somebody then  
16 going out, and then you don't have an updated  
17 address. We know what happens when somebody's  
18 discharged from Rikers. And if they're being picked  
19 up by hand, I imagine there's the ability to get them  
20 in the hands, at least in the next 24 to 48 hours, so  
21 that you're not missing folks.

1  
2           Because, unfortunately, there are a lot  
3 of folks that are eligible to vote who come in and  
4 out with these super short sentences, whether it's  
5 seven days, 14 days, 30-day sentences, and you could  
6 miss them entirely. And then these are people who are  
7 housing precarious, usually, and then you can't find  
8 them, and then they miss the chance to vote.

9           So, I would love it if you could follow  
10 up with us on what can be done to make that quicker  
11 and more efficient.

12           Actually, that was my next question. Is  
13 there a policy in place to expedite the delivery? I  
14 know it's hand-done, but is this the same process for  
15 court or immigration-related notices?

16           DEPUTY COMMISSIONER COLÓN: To be quite  
17 frank, I would have no idea.

18           COUNCIL MEMBER CABÁN: Okay.

19           DEPUTY COMMISSIONER COLÓN: I don't  
20 oversee that.

21           COUNCIL MEMBER CABÁN: Okay.

          I would love to get an answer on that. I  
know you weren't prepared for that question. So I  
understand.

1  
2           What type of oversight and record  
3 maintenance is conducted with regard to the names and  
4 numbers of voters registered and absentee ballots  
5 collected and returned by the DOC?

6           DEPUTY COMMISSIONER COLÓN: I'm sorry, can  
7 you repeat that question?

8           COUNCIL MEMBER CABÁN: Sure.

9           What type of oversight and record  
10 maintenance is conducted with regard to the names and  
11 numbers of voters registered and absentee ballots  
12 collected and then returned by DOC?

13           DEPUTY COMMISSIONER COLÓN: So every  
14 person that we do engage with, that we are giving  
15 them a form or receiving one back, we do maintain  
16 their information in our own, you know, data tracking  
17 system, so that we're aware of who we're actually  
18 interacting with, engaging with, and then can  
19 therefore expect to deliver back, ideally, an  
20 absentee ballot to.

21           So we do manage that, but I would like to  
just say that you said oversight...

          COUNCIL MEMBER CABÁN: Yeah...

1  
2 DEPUTY COMMISSIONER COLÓN: But there is  
3 an annual report required of all city agencies, and  
4 we do comply and submit that on an annual basis.

5 COUNCIL MEMBER CABÁN: Okay, thank you.  
6 Thank you, Chair.

7 CHAIRPERSON BREWER: Council Member  
8 Narcisse?

9 COUNCIL MEMBER NARCISSE: Thank you,  
10 Chairs, and thank you, Deputy Commissioner, and of  
11 course, the panel who are here.

12 My questions, some of them may be, like  
13 you can say that we repeat questions, but we have to  
14 have a clear understanding.

15 If I may say that there's a percentage of  
16 folks in Rikers that don't have the tablets, right?  
17 They don't have access to tablets. How many of  
18 those-- because we can understand that there's a gap  
19 in getting access to what they deserve.

20 DEPUTY COMMISSIONER COLÓN: Yeah. So if  
21 we're talking about tablet operations and tablet  
distribution, we do have a portion of our population,  
which we call the eligible population. We typically  
hover-- and I don't have the exact number for today,  
but it's typically between 80% and 90% of people who

1  
2 are eligible for a tablet have received a tablet. Now  
3 there are some variables to that. If someone broke  
4 their tablet, they may no longer have that tablet in  
5 their possession, but they have been afforded a new  
6 tablet. There are some additional variables. When I  
7 say the word eligible, typically what we're talking  
8 about is somebody who has transitioned out of new  
9 admission housing, has been here for over 30 days,  
10 and is now in general population housing.

11 So there are a few thousand active tablet  
12 users. Again, 80 to 90% of people who have been here  
13 over 30 days have a tablet or have been distributed  
14 one, but that doesn't always mean they have it in  
15 their possession.

16 COUNCIL MEMBER NARCISSE: Okay.

17 ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER GREISOKH: And if I  
18 may just add, if someone might not have a tablet,  
19 they could still request a form through a staff  
20 member, through a counseling member, they can pick it  
21 up in program areas like a law library, so people  
have different ways to register to vote.

COUNCIL MEMBER NARCISSE: Thank you.

So we have some that don't have access.  
Okay.

1  
2           Statistics show that there's a 63%  
3 absentee ballot completion rate citywide. Advocates  
4 report roughly about 20% in DOC facilities. Can the  
5 Administration explain where the gap is coming from?  
6 What's being done right now to correct the gap?

7           DEPUTY COMMISSIONER COLÓN: Yeah, I mean,  
8 I think it would be hard to speculate on the exact  
9 gap of why somebody may not be interested in  
10 registering to vote and/or interested in getting an  
11 absentee ballot.

12           But I think in our own reflection on  
13 this, and where we know that we can improve, is  
14 making sure that we are increasing access. And so  
15 again, that's like taking our own reflection point  
16 and saying, is 16 drives with volunteers, and the  
17 Legal Aid Society, and partnering with DOC enough, or  
18 does there need to be more?

19           So I think in our own acknowledgement  
20 that we need to increase our efforts around education  
21 and access to have that interactive voter experience,  
22 that experience that is a person-to-person  
23 conversation. This is why we have started to partner  
24 with a partnering organization to make sure that we  
25 have consistent weekly conversations with people in

1  
2 custody across multiple facility sites. Again, much  
3 more regularly than 16 times a year.

4 COUNCIL MEMBER NARCISSE: The reason I'm  
5 asking questions about this is that I cannot imagine  
6 someone like Nelson Mandela did not have access to  
7 vote while he was in custody.

8 How are mistakes or lost ballots reported  
9 internally at the DOC? And who is responsible for  
10 following up?

11 DEPUTY COMMISSIONER COLÓN: I'm sorry,  
12 you said?

13 COUNCIL MEMBER NARCISSE: If a ballot--  
14 how are mistakes-- like there's a mistake on the  
15 ballot or a lost ballot reported internally at DOC?

16 DEPUTY COMMISSIONER COLÓN: So the curing  
17 process is really by state law and by design through  
18 the Board of Elections, and the DOC is not aware.

19 COUNCIL MEMBER NARCISSE: So, if it is  
20 lost, let's say somebody had a problem with their  
21 ballot, so they immediately have to call, uh, the  
Board of Elections, or what do they do?

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER COLÓN: Yeah, if there  
was-- I mean, if there was a ballot that something  
occurred when it went to the Board of Elections, that

1  
2 there was a mistake on it and it goes into the curing  
3 process...

4 COUNCIL MEMBER NARCISSE: Mm-hmm?

5 DEPUTY COMMISSIONER COLÓN: We would not  
6 be readily aware of that information. That is in the  
7 purview of the Board of Elections as per state law  
8 for curing.

9 COUNCIL MEMBER NARCISSE: Mm-hmm. Okay.

10 Have there been instances where DOC staff  
11 (INAUDIBLE)... So, let me understand. DOC doesn't get  
12 involved at all with the ballots? Or you get  
13 involved?

14 DEPUTY COMMISSIONER COLÓN: Our role is--  
15 I mean, we've called it facilitation. Our role is...

16 COUNCIL MEMBER NARCISSE: Okay.

17 DEPUTY COMMISSIONER COLÓN: Making sure  
18 that people have access as requested...

19 COUNCIL MEMBER NARCISSE: Mm-hmm?

20 DEPUTY COMMISSIONER COLÓN: to facilitate  
21 access to the ballot.

COUNCIL MEMBER NARCISSE: Mm-hmm?

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER COLÓN: And, then,  
facilitate, if it is returned to the Department, that

1  
2 we then physically bring it to the Board of  
3 Elections.

4 COUNCIL MEMBER NARCISSE: Got it.

5 Have there been instances where DOC staff  
6 have delayed ballot delivery? How were those handled?  
7 And is the delivery timeline tracked?

8 DEPUTY COMMISSIONER COLÓN: So when we  
9 receive a ballot, there is, you know, we're making  
10 sure that we're delivering it in the timeline  
11 prescribed and as defined to us by the Board of  
12 Elections. So they (TIMER) would give us a defined  
13 date by which we would have to return the ballots.  
14 And, since we are hand-delivering those ballots, we  
15 would be bringing them to the Board of Elections by  
16 that date.

17 COUNCIL MEMBER NARCISSE: My time is up.  
18 Thank you for your time.

19 CHAIRPERSON BREWER: Thank you very much.

20 Mr. Ryan, what are the most common  
21 reasons that ballots from Rikers are not counted? Are  
there certain rejections that are common? How can we  
address those?

1  
2 EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR RYAN: So we have  
3 provided a laminated card that gives instructions on  
4 how to fill out the absentee ballot form.

5 Typically, the most common issue is a  
6 missing signature. So, much in the same way that the  
7 signature provides access to the ballot for voter  
8 registration purposes, the signature is what tells us  
9 legally that you voted this ballot and you want it to  
10 count under your registration.

11 So if there's a missing signature, we  
12 have to reject that and request-- So the bad news is  
13 that some ballots get rejected. The good news is that  
14 the New York State Legislature has implemented a cure  
15 process. And people take advantage of it, including  
16 those who are currently housed on Rikers Island. They  
17 take advantage of it to fix a mistake that was on the  
18 absentee ballot envelope.

19 CHAIRPERSON BREWER: Thank you. That's  
20 very helpful.

21 Now, do you think that-- obviously, we  
22 have a June primary, maybe some specials in between,  
23 I don't know, and then obviously November. Do you  
24 think within some of those windows that the Board of  
25 Elections could send some staff to Rikers to

1  
2 supplement both what Correction is doing and the  
3 volunteers, at least to see what's going on and to  
4 see how they could improve it, or you could improve  
5 it? Is that possible?

6 EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR RYAN: Chair, I can  
7 commit to you that we will take a hard look at that  
8 process, communicate with the Department of  
9 Correction, and come back to you with an initial  
10 assessment.

11 CHAIRPERSON BREWER: Thank you very much,  
12 Sir. That means yes. I know you.

13 EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR RYAN: (LAUGHS)

14 CHAIRPERSON BREWER: The other thing I  
15 want to say is, for the computer et cetera, at the  
16 facility-- So I know you said everybody-- I know I've  
17 been there, I've seen all the wonderful iPads. But  
18 you've got internet issues sometimes, even those of  
19 us who look at a ballot, and I certainly know them  
20 pretty well, I don't know half of the people I'm  
21 voting for. I'm gonna be honest with you. So judges,  
22 et cetera, it's all there. Ballot initiative, it's  
23 complicated. And if you're not plugged in, people ask  
24 me what's on the ballot?

1  
2           So it's one thing to register, but then  
3 you get nervous, maybe you're not doing the right  
4 thing, et cetera.

5           So what is the curriculum? People might  
6 even, you know, with more education and push, you  
7 might get more people saying, how do I register on my  
8 iPad if the internet is working, if the iPad is  
9 working, et cetera?

10           So, what, in addition to-- we have  
11 people, we have volunteers, we have staffers doing  
12 this, what else do we do to make sure the iPad can  
13 register people and then explain why it is important  
14 to do so?

15           And then of course, once you get the  
16 ballot, somebody has to explain to you what's on it.  
17 It's a lot. It's not a one-step process.

18           ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER GREISOKH: So on  
19 the tablet, people are able to request to receive an  
20 absentee ballot form or a voter registration form.

21           The curriculum that is facilitated by a  
counseling team goes over why it's important to vote,  
what voting looks like in New York City, and what  
voting looks like on Rikers.

1  
2 Also, in partnership with the New York  
3 Campaign Finance Board, we obtain voter education  
4 guides, which are available on the tablet and also in  
5 program spaces, like the law library.

6 So Voter Education Guides really show who  
7 is on the ballot and provide that information to  
8 people in our care.

9 CHAIRPERSON BREWER: I'm glad they read it  
10 because people in my neighborhood don't read it. So  
11 I'm glad that folks on Rikers do.

12 One more question for the Board of  
13 Elections, then I'll turn it over to my co-chair.

14 Can you explain, again, the legal and  
15 logistical issues that you feel are a challenge with  
16 putting a polling place at Rikers Island? Can you be  
17 specific?

18 EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR RYAN: Yes, I provided  
19 the Committee with a series of letters that have gone  
20 back and forth with it.

21 Just keep in mind that there have been  
some changes to the election law since 2024, most  
notably, the early mail ballot, which expands  
opportunities and the process—as well as, if you

1  
2 request an absentee ballot, you can't vote on a  
3 machine, which does not apply to this population.

4 In any event, in a series of  
5 conversations with the State Board of Elections, it  
6 is the considered legal opinion of both the City  
7 Board and the State Board of Elections that the  
8 absentee ballot process is presently the only legal  
9 mechanism available for individuals to vote who will  
10 not be present within their home district on Election  
11 Day—including overseas, military, others that  
12 request, and people who are presently detained in  
13 Rikers Island.

14 CHAIRPERSON BREWER: That's clear, thank  
15 you.

16 Council Member Zhuang has joined us.

17 I will now turn back over to my co-chair  
18 for a second round of questions.

19 CHAIRPERSON BROOKS-POWERS: Thank you.

20 Going back to the Board of Elections,  
21 just wanting to pick up where we left off: Has the  
Board of Elections compared voting participation  
rates in Rikers to other jurisdictions with jail-  
based voting to identify best practices?

1  
2 EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR RYAN: No, we haven't.  
3 We don't have access to the rolling data that's  
4 associated with the Rikers Island population.

5 So if you went strictly off of raw  
6 numbers, uh, of people who were eligible to vote, who  
7 were at some point during a calendar year in Rikers  
8 Island, that wouldn't give you a clear picture. And  
9 what you would ultimately get is a snapshot of who's  
10 there in a moment in time. And having attended at one  
11 time in my life, the Population Control Meetings  
12 every Friday at the Department of Elections, for  
13 three years, I know that population changes every  
14 day. So if you have 500 people, okay, but if they're  
15 500 different people, then that creates a tracking  
16 problem.

17 I don't have any good answers on how that  
18 could be tracked. I certainly could have a  
19 conversation with the Department of Correction to see  
20 if they have any ideas. But I think the fluidity of  
21 the Rikers Island population presents tracking  
challenges for sure.

CHAIRPERSON BROOKS-POWERS: I would love  
to work with you, as well as the Department of  
Correction, to really try to look at some of

1  
2 that--and Chair Brewer, of course-- to look at some  
3 of that raw data. Right? Because even if we took that  
4 snapshot, to be able to compare to see, in this  
5 moment and time, these different facilities had this  
6 amount of people in custody who were registered to  
7 vote, who requested a ballot. Because it would kind  
8 of give some level of perspective, I would argue, in  
9 terms of what will give you a greater sense of  
10 participation versus not. And while the sample size  
11 may be small, maybe it could still give us a little  
12 context with that. But thank you for sharing your  
13 thoughts on it.

14  
15 Last question: has the BOE ever had  
16 discussions with other jurisdictions that have  
17 implemented polling places within jails? Like, have  
18 you even had a conversation on this?

19  
20 EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR RYAN: So the answer to  
21 that question is no. As the law remains the way that  
we believe it remains, and has been directed to us by  
the State Board of Elections, we don't believe it's a  
conversation to have until we have enabling  
legislation.

CHAIRPERSON BROOKS-POWERS: Thank you for  
that.

1  
2           Chair, I would say that's the end of my  
3 questions. But what I did take from today's  
4 conversation is that we have a voting community that  
5 has for quite some time actually been, not  
6 necessarily prioritized as the general public who are  
7 not in custody, in terms of being able to access  
8 their-- or exercise, rather, their right to vote.

9           And so I think there's a lot of  
10 opportunity that exists here where we can collaborate  
11 legislatively with our State colleagues, as well as  
12 the Board of Elections in the Department of  
13 Corrections.

14           And I look forward to engaging with  
15 everyone around this. Thank you.

16           CHAIRPERSON BREWER: Thank you.

17           Council Member Salaam, you have  
18 questions?

19           COUNCIL MEMBER SALAAM: Yes, thank you.

20           To the Board of Elections, in the June  
21 2024 primary, only 72 of the 364 ballot requests from  
Rikers Island resulted in counted votes.

          How many of those rejected ballots had  
curable defects? And how many of those curable

1  
2 defects were successfully cured by voters still in  
3 DOC custody?

4 EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR RYAN: In 2024?

5 COUNCIL MEMBER SALAAM: Yes.

6 EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR RYAN: I don't have  
7 that information before me presently.

8 I am certain it is accessible from our  
9 system, and I will provide the same to you after this  
10 hearing concludes.

11 COUNCIL MEMBER SALAAM: I appreciate that.

12 To the DOC, under the bill's  
13 seven-business-day return requirement for cured  
14 affirmations, what operational challenges, staffing  
15 additions, or transportation adjustments would be  
16 necessary beyond the current once-weekly courier trip  
17 to the Board of Queens office?

18 DEPUTY COMMISSIONER COLÓN: This is  
19 associated with the curing legislation?

20 COUNCIL MEMBER SALAAM: I believe so.

21 DEPUTY COMMISSIONER COLÓN: I think really  
where it needs to start for us, and just to kind of  
emphasize from our point of view, is that curing is  
part of the state law requirements of the Board of  
Elections. And so we really would need to have

1  
2 further conversations with the Council and with the  
3 Law Department and with the Board of Elections to see  
4 what those challenges would be.

5 COUNCIL MEMBER SALAAM: Also, the  
6 Department currently relies on the Vote in NYC Jail's  
7 Coalition and other volunteers for the most direct  
8 voter registration work and selects which facilities  
9 are visited.

10 How frequently is each housing unit on  
11 Rikers Island visited for voter registration in a  
12 calendar year, and what criteria determine facility  
13 selection?

14 DEPUTY COMMISSIONER COLÓN: Thank you so  
15 much for that question.

16 Our goal and intention is that if we're  
17 affording 16 Voter registration drives a year, that  
18 means that every facility gets visited, but through  
19 those voter registration drives in and of themselves  
20 alone, that would mean each facility gets visited  
21 about twice a year from those volunteers and from the  
Voting on Rikers Working Group.

And then it is our responsibility, as a  
department and as an agency, to make sure that any  
housing unit that wasn't visited during those voter

1  
2 registration drives is given equal access to voter  
3 registration forms and is given equal access to voter  
4 registration education as well.

5 COUNCIL MEMBER SALAAM: Thank you.

6 The bill requires disaggregation by race,  
7 age, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation,  
8 disability status, and veteran status. Does the  
9 Department currently collect each of those data  
10 points in a form comparable to voter registration  
11 tracking? And if not, what system changes would be  
12 needed by the January 31st, 2027, reporting deadline?

13 DEPUTY COMMISSIONER COLÓN: Thank you so  
14 much.

15 And I just want to highlight and begin  
16 with, transparency is really a cornerstone of this  
17 administration being led under Commissioner Richards.  
18 So, some of that data, I would have to get back on  
19 every single aspect of the data to see how we're  
20 gathering it. Because when we're collecting forms  
21 back, we're not necessarily collecting demographics  
in that fashion, but the Department would like to  
work with Council to see how we can identify giving  
this information as applicable and associated with  
voter registration and absentee ballot access.

1  
2 COUNCIL MEMBER SALAAM: Thank you. Thank  
3 you, Chairs.

4 CHAIRPERSON BREWER: Thank you very much.  
5 You are all free to go. We appreciate your testimony  
6 very much. But do not think this is the end of this  
7 conversation.

8 I want to say the same thing as my  
9 colleague: We're really, really serious about getting  
10 5,000 people, whatever the number is, eligible to  
11 vote at Rikers Island.

12 Thank you very much. Thank you. Thank  
13 you, Mike Ryan, also.

14 EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR RYAN: Thank you.

15 DEPUTY COMMISSIONER COLÓN: Thank you.

16 CHAIRPERSON BREWER: Thank you all very  
17 much.

18 EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR RYAN: Have a good day,  
19 all.

20 CHAIRPERSON BREWER: You, too.

21 So now we're going to open the hearing  
for public testimony. I remind the public that this  
is a governmental proceeding and that decorum shall  
be observed at all times. Members of the public shall  
remain silent at all times.

1  
2 The witness table is for people who wish  
3 to testify. No video recording or photography is  
4 allowed from that table.

5 Members of the public may not present  
6 audio or video recordings as testimony, but may  
7 submit transcripts to the Sergeant at Arms for  
8 inclusion in the hearing record.

9 If you wish to speak, as you know, please  
10 fill out an appearance card with the Sergeant at Arms  
11 and wait to be recognized.

12 Our first panel is very special; we have  
13 invited members of the Vote in New York City Jail's  
14 Coalition, who are an actor, a stakeholder, and very  
15 much so, in voter registration and voting on Rikers  
16 Island.

17 These panelists will have five minutes to  
18 speak. Obviously, if you have a statement or written  
19 testimony you want to submit, please provide a copy  
20 to the Sergeant at Arms.

21 You can also email any written testimony  
to [testimony@council.nyc.gov](mailto:testimony@council.nyc.gov) within 72 hours of the  
close of the hearing. Audio and video recordings will  
not be accepted.

1  
2           Once your name is called, please come up  
3 to the table. And we will call: Victor Pate, Takeasha  
4 Newton, Anthony Posada, Michael Klinger, Kai  
5 Rosenthal, and Robert Whitaker. These are people from  
6 the Coalition. Thank you very much. Come on up.

7           And whoever would like to start, feel  
8 free. You have five minutes. You have a lot of time  
9 to talk. We're giving you a lot of time. And we  
10 appreciate you being here.

11           VICTOR PATE: Good morning, good morning.  
12 Thank you so much, Council Member Brewer and Council  
13 Member Brooks-Powers, and to all who have had a hand  
14 in creating this platform.

15           My name is Victor Pate. I am a member of  
16 the Vote in NYC Jails Coalition. I am also a formerly  
17 incarcerated person who was detained on Rikers  
18 Island.

19           And I would first like to say that by no  
20 means do the things you might hear me say in any way  
21 disparaging or even to dilute those who worked with  
us in this coalition, of the Department of  
Correction.

          And I'd first like to say that, you know,  
New Yorkers who are detained in jails lack the same

1  
2 access that voters who are not detained have. In  
3 spite of the fact that they say it is providing full  
4 access to ballot boxes, I can tell you for sure, it  
5 sounds good, but I am one of those who actually go to  
6 Rikers Island, and have been doing this registration  
7 for about three years now. And I can tell you that  
8 the process does not work as good as they say. And I  
9 will just take a few moments just to kind of sort of  
10 walk you through what that process actually looks  
11 like, the mechanics of it.

12 So, we usually gather at the Boulevard  
13 building, which is the Department of Correction  
14 corporate office. We are met by a DOC a staff member,  
15 who has a van waiting for us. We are loaded up into  
16 the van, and we are taken to the designated facility  
17 for that particular day to begin the voter  
18 registration process.

19 We're given two transparent backpacks,  
20 which include the voter registration and the absentee  
21 ballot forms, and whatever other information may be  
available at the time.

Depending on the number of volunteers who  
are available for that day, we either go into one

1  
2 group or we go into two separate groups to the  
3 designated dormitories.

4 One of the things that we have been  
5 trying to get for the longest time, and that is also  
6 still not on a regular basis, is the signage of  
7 notification that we're coming.

8 I kind of sort of find it kind of odd,  
9 the fact that we have a registration calendar for the  
10 year. How come we don't have signage and  
11 notifications that are also put up in the various  
12 dormitories that we will be visiting for that  
13 particular day? Which we've been working on for such  
14 a long, long time. And it works sometimes, and it  
15 doesn't work sometimes. I think there should be an  
16 improvement in that particular process in itself.

17 Once we're in the dormitories, one of us  
18 usually announces who we are and what we're there  
19 for. Usually, we're directed to an area in that  
20 particular dormitory, or if it's a cellblock area, to  
21 where we can actually sit with the detainees and  
actually do the registration and absentee ballot  
processing itself.

Once this is completed, it is then up to  
DOC to transmit the completed forms and the absentee

1  
2 ballots to the BOE. Therein lies, I guess, room for  
3 much improvement. And therein also lies the fact  
4 that, when we are actually on Rikers Island doing  
5 these actual registrations, oftentimes, if the  
6 dormitory is available for us to be in a room where  
7 we can actually do the registration, oftentimes,  
8 detainees may not be in the dormitory at that  
9 particular time. There may be some programmatic  
10 things going on at that particular time. But, more  
11 importantly, they normally don't know we're coming  
12 there until we actually announce that we are there to  
13 do the voter registration.

14  
15 It is really amazing that the people who  
16 we are actually going into register are actually  
17 looking forward to it, and would be interested in  
18 registering to vote, if they had more information,  
19 especially when I mentioned the notification, and the  
20 signage is oftentimes nonexistent.

21  
22 The other important piece about this here  
23 is that, and you've mentioned this before about the  
24 civic engagement, now we heard, you know, the mention  
25 of the civic engagement, which in my humble opinion,  
26 doesn't actually happen on a regular basis; although,  
27 they may say they do it.

1  
2 I have personally asked the detainees,  
3 once we're there, do you get civic engagement? And  
4 they give me this incredulous look like, "What's  
5 that?" So I would beg to differ when they say  
6 there's an ongoing, robust civic engagement. I don't  
7 think that's actually happened, although it may be  
8 happening periodically. And just what particular  
9 facilities these happen in, most of the facilities  
10 that I've gone to, I've asked, and they give me the  
11 same look, like, what's that?

12 The other piece we also heard mentioned  
13 here is the fact that the voters' information is  
14 supposed to be on the tablet. Most of the time when  
15 we go in there, we are doing civic engagement,  
16 one-on-one, on the spot. So the fact of the matter is  
17 that (TIMER), that's the bell, right?

18 CHAIRPERSON BREWER: Finish up, finish up  
19 your sentence.

20 VICTOR PATE: So, the fact of the matter  
21 is that there's a robust civic engagement going on; I  
22 beg to differ and say that it does not happen. If it  
23 does, it's very few and far between.

24 This process, it's good to say that they  
25 have full access to the ballot box, which I in fact

1  
2 know that does not actually apply to Rikers Island,  
3 and a lot more needs to be done to improve this  
4 process.

5 CHAIRPERSON BREWER: Thank you.

6 Michael?

7 MICHAEL KLINGER: Good afternoon. Thank  
8 you to Chairs Brewer and Brooks-Powers, their staff,  
9 and to both committee staff for highlighting the  
10 critical issue of voting in the city jails.

11 My name is Michael Klinger, and I'm a  
12 Jail Services Attorney with Brooklyn Defenders, which  
13 is a proud member of the Vote in New York City Jails  
14 Coalition.

15 I'd like to briefly address the  
16 legislation on today's agenda:

17 Intro 786 would require the Department of  
18 Correction to report on the number of notices and  
19 cure affirmations received from the Board of  
20 Elections to be delivered to voters in city custody  
21 for the purposes of curing, as well as the number of  
cure affirmations returned to the Board of Elections.

This bill takes a critical step forward  
in helping to understand whether the Board and the  
Department are meaningfully meeting the requirements

1  
2 of state election law, Section 9-209, which requires  
3 an opportunity for voters to cure when a defect is  
4 deemed curable.

5 Intro 797 would require the Department to  
6 report the number of voter registration events it  
7 facilitates, the number of completed registration  
8 forms it receives from people in custody, and the  
9 number of absentee ballots it distributes to people  
10 in custody.

11 This bill would enhance the reporting  
12 already required under City Charter Section 1057-A by  
13 requiring greater detail about how registration is  
14 conducted.

15 The current reporting is so shrouded that  
16 the Department can count placing forms in the law  
17 library the same as a volunteer-led outreach visit to  
18 the housing units. This bill would help shed much  
19 more light on that process.

20 We must acknowledge that, to the extent  
21 Intro 786 seeks information from the Board of  
Elections, it does so through a request to the  
Department. The Board is a creature of state law, and  
we understand the necessity of this approach.

1  
2 I will be submitting written testimony  
3 that will include some proposed additions intended to  
4 enhance the granularity of the reporting that the  
5 Department is asked to include, even if it must rely  
6 on the Board for that data.

7 But the more important request to share  
8 with the Council today involves a return to first  
9 principles. The Council, the Board of Elections, and  
10 the Department of Corrections should be able, and in  
11 fact, I think we heard Executive Director Ryan say  
12 they would be able to commit themselves to greater  
13 collaboration, and particularly sharing basic data on  
14 outcomes that may extend beyond the requirements of  
15 the City Charter and even the state election law.

16 The efforts of this volunteer coalition  
17 are only successful to the extent that the other  
18 parties cooperate. And we urge the Council to take  
19 this opportunity, and this budget season opportunity,  
20 to forge an understanding with the boards that basic  
21 periodic reporting is critical to identifying both  
22 how this project is faring and where additional  
23 resources may be most useful.

24 Finally, we encourage the Council to  
25 review the July 2025 report from the Sentencing

1  
2 Project: Voting From Prison: Lessons From Maine and  
3 Vermont. Those are two states where people are  
4 permitted to vote even while serving a state  
5 sentence, but many of the lessons apply to our jails  
6 as well.

7  
8 There are a few straightforward  
9 technocratic suggestions, some of which were alluded  
10 to here today, such as providing increased access to  
11 candidate and referendum information through tablet  
12 programming and increasing access to online voter  
13 registration using laptops during scheduled voter  
14 registration visits.

15  
16 The report also calls on jails to create  
17 official voting rights policies and staff guidance,  
18 educate all staff on the voting rights of people in  
19 the jails, to formalize working relationships with  
20 voting rights partners like us at this table, and  
21 make a meaningful staffing commitment of more than  
just one or two people to administering the critical  
work of civic engagement in the jails.

The report concludes that the only way to  
truly provide equitable access to voting is to  
implement on-site polling locations.

1  
2           And we look forward to working through  
3 the practicability challenges with you all in  
4 achieving this for New York City. Thank you.

5           CHAIRPERSON BREWER: Thank you. Next?

6           TAKEASHA NEWTON: Good afternoon. My name  
7 is Takisha Lashawn (phonetic) Newton. I am the Lead  
8 Community Organizer in our Community Justice Unit at  
9 the Legal Age Society. And I am the Lead Volunteer  
10 Coordinator for our Voting in Jails Coalition.

11           I have been going into Rikers since late  
12 2019. I am the initial person who received an ID to  
13 not be escorted by an officer and to assert civic  
14 engagement to our constituents who are incarcerated.

15           For six years now, I can tell you what I  
16 have viewed. I've heard the word "integrity"  
17 mentioned here. And the DOC officials who were at  
18 this table before us did not show integrity.

19           So I want to be clear that the DOC staff  
20 does nothing when we are going in to extend voting  
21 privileges to our constituents incarcerated. They  
just stand around and assert fear-mongering tactics.

          Everyone who goes in to volunteer is  
trained by us. They receive an email with all the

1  
2 information that they need, and also a training  
3 meeting.

4           However, as Victor mentioned, when we go  
5 to the Boulevard Building, we are met there with  
6 procrastination tactics, supposedly training.

7           We are also only told that we can take 13  
8 people with us, because the van only holds a certain  
9 number of people.

10           DOC staff will also assert members of  
11 their own to join us who are not included in the  
12 number that we were given.

13           A laminated information document was  
14 mentioned. We also don't know where that comes from.

15           Not everyone has a tablet at Rikers  
16 Island, and if they do, they barely work. They can't  
17 even pull up the information to try to inform someone  
18 that they would like to vote.

19           Aside from that, in the community, as a  
20 grassroots organizer, when I register people to vote  
21 in the community, I take their voter registration  
forms to the BOE office, and I am given a receipt.  
For years, we have asked for data and receipts, and  
we have been presented with nothing.

1  
2 If there is no A or B officer in the dorm  
3 or cell area, those constituents will not have the  
4 right to vote at all.

5 If an individual is moved to another  
6 building, they have no right to vote.

7 If an officer comes to the location and  
8 the person incarcerated is not there, and may be  
9 there at the mess hall eating, that officer will not  
10 come back with that ballot to ensure that that person  
11 can actually vote.

12 If the CO simply doesn't like how loud it  
13 is in an area, they will say we cannot go there.

14 If a signature on an absentee ballot form  
15 does not match the registration form, the BOE will  
16 deny that person access to vote.

17 (PAUSE)

18 I'm sorry, I'm just viewing my notes to  
19 make sure I did not miss anything--41 seconds left.

20 I will say that if we have 6,000 people  
21 incarcerated, tell me how we are doing a great  
service by only going in once a month and reaching  
one facility? It is absurd.

We should have more vans. We should have  
more staff available. And all the more, we want a

1  
2 polling site at the city jail. The same way that they  
3 can gather up people from all of these different  
4 neighborhoods throughout New York City and  
5 incarcerate them, while they have not been convicted  
6 (TIMER) of a crime, then they can get the means  
7 together to ensure that those people can vote,  
8 because it is their constitutional right. Thank you.

9 CHAIRPERSON BREWER: Thank you very much.

10 ROBERT WILLIS: Thank you very much for  
11 allowing me to provide testimony. My name is Robert  
12 Willis. I'm a Justice Advocate Coordinator at Latino  
13 Justice. For over 50 years, we have worked to improve  
14 racial justice and build a more equitable society.

15 But today I'm speaking as someone who is  
16 formerly incarcerated and returned to Rikers Island  
17 to engage in voter registration efforts.

18 What I witnessed was not just neglect,  
19 but systematic disregard. I saw complete voter forms  
20 and ballots thrown into the trash. Not misplaced,  
21 *discarded*. That's not accidental. That is a failure  
by design.

In 2021, New York restored voter rights  
to individuals not currently serving felony

1  
2 sentences. But without polling sites at jails, that  
3 remains inaccessible in practice.

4           Thousands of eligible voters in detention  
5 are still effectively silenced. The data makes it  
6 clear: In 2022, only 419 people were registered to  
7 vote at Rikers Island out of a population in the  
8 thousands. Not a single absentee ballot was reported  
9 as cast.

10           In 2023, that number dropped to 331  
11 registrations. Again, no ballots cast.

12           Even in 2024, when registration rose to  
13 1,325, the system still failed. During the June  
14 primary, only 155 absentee ballots were distributed,  
15 and just 72 were returned, out of a population of  
16 over 6,300 people.

17           In November's general election, 977  
18 ballots were issued, but only 546 were counted.

19           In 2025, the pattern continued. During  
20 the June primary, 271 ballots were issued, but only  
21 178 were counted.

          And in the November general election, 654  
ballot applications were submitted, but 374 were  
issued, and 98 were ultimately counted.

(PAUSE)

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Give me one second.

And 98 were ultimately counted.

At every stage, the system has failed in the distribution and return of people's ballots, and people are being locked out from voting. Even at the peak, fewer than 10% of eligible individuals were able to cast ballots.

This is not a functioning system. It is a barrier. The solution is straightforward. A polling site needs to be established at Rikers Island, not just one, but multiple sites, making it accessible for all to engage without causing too much disruption. This is the only way to ensure meaningful access to the ballot and uphold the fundamental right to vote.

We also need transparency and tracking mechanisms so that both the Board of Elections and the Department of Corrections can be held accountable.

We cannot continue to accept a system that disenfranchises thousands of eligible voters. That work has already begun at the state level with the Free to Vote Act, but we must continue to put

1  
2 pressure on all who seek to undermine the fundamental  
3 right to vote.

4 Thank you for your time, and I hope you  
5 join us in standing up for the right to vote.

6 And I just want to close—In Harris County  
7 in Houston, Texas, and Texas is not a bastion of, you  
8 know, trying to get access to vote— they allow  
9 people to vote at any polling site in the county.  
10 That same premise can be applied to Rikers, as it  
11 looks at Rikers Island. If a community like that,  
12 that has undermined the vote, can still agree to  
13 allow people to vote, as just members of their  
14 community, we can apply that to Rikers Island.

15 I just wanted to add that there, because  
16 keeping people's humanity in focus is important at  
17 this time. Thank you very much. I appreciate it.

18 CHAIRPERSON BREWER: Thank you very much.  
19 Next, thank you, Sir.

20 ANTHONY POSADA: Good afternoon. Thank  
21 you, Chair Brewer and Chair Brooks-Powers, for the  
opportunity to testify. My name is Anthony Posada,  
and I'm a supervising attorney in the Legal Aid  
Society's Community Justice Unit and the founder of  
the Vote in New York City Jails Coalition.

1  
2 I'll focus on my testimony today on some  
3 of the history of the Coalition and the systemic  
4 failures that we've noticed with the existing  
5 program.

6 Our coalition is composed of directly  
7 impacted New Yorkers, legal service providers, civic  
8 engagement groups, and elected officials, which was  
9 created in 2020 to address the unmet needs of  
10 eligible voters detained in New York City jails.

11 We have consistently advocated for  
12 polling sites in these jails.

13 In New York, anyone who is incarcerated  
14 while serving a misdemeanor conviction or because  
15 they cannot afford their bail is eligible to vote. As  
16 of right now, the close to 7,000 individuals who are  
17 at Rikers Island retain their right to vote. There  
18 are no voting sites in New York City jails, and  
19 therefore, individuals who wish to vote are at the  
20 mercy of the Department of Corrections each Election  
21 Day.

22 Accordingly, the majority of New Yorkers  
23 detained on Rikers Island, who regularly have their  
24 rights violated, their voices silenced, and their  
25 humanity denied by this city agency and its actors,

1  
2 also have their fundamental right to vote taken from  
3 them.

4 Our coalition visits Rikers Island  
5 monthly to provide vital education and necessary  
6 paperwork for voter registration and absentee ballot  
7 requests.

8 The coalition also advocates with  
9 lawmakers and city agencies to improve the voting  
10 process for detained New Yorkers, including calling  
11 for a polling site within the jail.

12 Our experience working with eligible  
13 voters detained at Rikers Island has revealed the  
14 systemic failures of both the Board of Elections and  
15 the Department of Corrections to provide true access  
16 to the ballot under the current absentee ballot  
17 voting framework, which is why we need a polling site  
18 at Rikers Island.

19 When we started going into Rikers Island  
20 to facilitate voting in 2016, we did so around the  
21 same time that the governor was issuing pardons for  
people on parole to have their rights restored to  
vote. The first thing that we encountered still  
exists today: there is a wave of misinformation for

1  
2 people who are at Rikers Island about their right to  
3 vote.

4 Many of them believe that they're not  
5 eligible to vote. Some of them believe that because  
6 they have had prior convictions, they cannot vote.  
7 And so that is the first thing that is very apparent.  
8 There needs to be a consistent and ongoing education  
9 program that tells people that they do have a right  
10 to vote and that encourages them to vote.

11 The second thing that we noticed is that  
12 voting in Rikers Island was entirely dependent on  
13 volunteer efforts. It is dependent on us to go in and  
14 register voters and supply them with the absentee  
15 ballot and the education to know that they are  
16 eligible to vote.

17 As Takeasha and Victor have already  
18 illustrated, the DOC staff, who are in charge of this  
19 program, have so many steps to take in this process  
20 and so few resources that are insufficient for them,  
21 that frequently what happens is that people are  
denied the right to vote.

We need a polling site. If we truly care  
about fair and free elections and full participation  
in the democratic process, we must ensure full and

1  
2 equal ballot access for New Yorkers in jails, most of  
3 whom are awaiting trial and cloaked in the  
4 presumption of innocence.

5 The absentee ballot voting system always  
6 leaves incarcerated voters behind, and one person  
7 disenfranchised is one person too many.

8 New York City should join the many other  
9 counties throughout the country by providing polling  
10 sites in all jails to ensure each voter is given a  
11 real opportunity to have their voice heard.

12 We need polling sites in New York City  
13 jails. In Cook County in November 2024, in that  
14 presidential election, 1,922 individuals voted  
15 successfully while incarcerated at the Cook County  
16 Jail. Nearly a third of them were people in custody.  
17 People incarcerated in Cook County have been able to  
18 vote in person since 2020 and have been called the  
19 city's most active precinct.

20 In the election prior to the opening of  
21 jail-based polling sites, only 434 incarcerated  
people were able to vote and submit an absentee  
ballot.

We should strengthen the absentee ballot  
process by requiring the Board of Elections to

1  
2 facilitate the voting program and ensure voters have  
3 access to the agency directly, including registration  
4 forms, education materials, and absentee ballot  
5 request forms.

6 While both agencies, as we saw today,  
7 pass responsibility off to the other, the impact upon  
8 communities of color is devastating: 92% of  
9 individuals currently detained in New York City jails  
10 are non-white. The organizations within the Vote in  
11 New York City Jails Coalitions have fought for equity  
12 on this issue, grounded in the reality that these  
13 policies are part of a practice that dates back to  
14 the founding of this country, which seeks to exclude  
15 these same communities from full participation in  
16 American life.

17 New Yorkers who are detained in jails  
18 must be given the same opportunity as all of us to  
19 have their voices heard, which is why we need a  
20 polling site. Thank you.

21 CHAIRPERSON BREWER: Thank you very much.

Next?

KAI ROSENTHAL: Thank you, Chairs Brewer  
and Brooks-Powers, and Members and staff of both  
committees, for convening the hearing today.

1  
2 I'm Kai Rosenthal, Co-President of the  
3 League of Women Voters of the City of New York, a  
4 nonpartisan, grassroots, volunteer-led organization  
5 committed to civic participation and voting rights,  
6 and a proud founding partner of the Vote in New York  
7 City Jails Coalition.

8 The League is here today with our  
9 coalition partners to bring to the forefront priority  
10 issues of accessing the vote at Rikers.

11 Today, I want to focus on voter  
12 education. The people detained at Rikers have a  
13 uniquely large and dramatic stake in how the city is  
14 governed. They are more directly affected by  
15 decisions made about courts, public defense, housing,  
16 healthcare, policing, and pay equity than almost any  
17 other single population.

18 The vast majority of people detained  
19 there are pretrial and retain their full right to  
20 vote. They are not just outside our democracy; they  
21 are part of it.

The League has spent over a century doing  
the work that transforms a legal right into an  
exercised one, helping people understand what is on  
their ballot, which issues affect their lives, how

1  
2 government works, and why their participation  
3 matters. That work requires sustained civic  
4 education.

5           At Rikers, it is almost entirely absent.  
6 The Department of Correction devotes one staff role  
7 at halftime to civic engagement for the entire  
8 population, about 7,000 people.

9           The approved civics presentation is  
10 outdated and rarely reaches those who need it.  
11 Tablets, the primary vehicle for sharing information,  
12 are unevenly distributed and frequently broken.

13           Through the Coalition's efforts, the 2025  
14 mayoral debates and the League's Civic Explainer,  
15 which makes New York City run, were made available on  
16 those tablets, but access remains inconsistent.

17           At one of the Coalition's monthly voter  
18 registration days at Rikers last week, people were  
19 hungry for basic information: Who is on the ballot?  
20 What do they stand for? What do these offices do? Why  
21 does my vote matter?

          Those are not complicated questions. They  
are exactly what civic education is supposed to  
answer, and the DOC is not answering them.

1  
2 We welcome the DOCs' plan to add two  
3 external civic programming staff. It is a step in the  
4 right direction, but it is absolutely not enough.

5 Civic education may not be a legal  
6 requirement, but the League believes it is a  
7 government obligation. Democracy does not sustain  
8 itself. It requires investment, especially in the  
9 communities most often excluded from it.

10 Volunteers and coalition partners should  
11 not be the last line of defense against systemic  
12 disenfranchisement and engagement.

13 An educated voting population requires  
14 regular access to the internet as well as public  
15 community forums and events.

16 Voters at Rikers lack these opportunities  
17 to obtain voter information that you and I enjoy  
18 year-round.

19 The City's Charter and Local Laws list  
20 many affirmative requirements for agencies around  
21 voter registration. The City should enact the same  
type of affirmative requirements to ensure and  
protect a person's right to voter education and  
information.

1  
2 We are calling for a comprehensive civic  
3 education program at Rikers, sustained, multilingual,  
4 and properly resourced. Not a pamphlet, not a  
5 one-time presentation, but regular, frequent  
6 programming that prepares detained New Yorkers to  
7 participate meaningfully in our democracy.

8 We are also asking for a polling site at  
9 Rikers, which is essential to protecting the voting  
10 rights of this community.

11 The League and Coalition stand ready to  
12 work with the Council to make this a reality. Thank  
13 you.

14 CHAIRPERSON BREWER: Thank you very much.  
15 I know my colleague has questions, but I have a  
16 couple.

17 One is do you-- I don't know if any of  
18 the Coalition or your members have funding dedicated  
19 specifically to maintaining this program for voter  
20 registration at Rikers. That's question number one.

21 And then the second one is, we did hear  
about these monthly meetings, right? And we heard a  
little bit about who participates, who doesn't. So  
I'd love to hear from you about how often the  
Coalition meets with the Department of Correction,

1  
2 with the Board of Elections? And how do those  
3 meetings go, and how would you like them to improve,  
4 if at all?

5 What is the program, and how could it be  
6 improved with communication?

7 Whoever would like to start?

8 TAKEASHA NEWTON: I can answer the  
9 question about funding.

10 We don't require funding. We provide our  
11 time and services to our constituents who are  
12 incarcerated, and we are there for them. We are open  
13 to extending more of our time, and not only one day a  
14 month, to assist the Department of Corrections with  
15 our constituents.

16 We also have a monthly meeting with the  
17 Department of Corrections. The Board of Elections  
18 previously joined some of those meetings. We haven't  
19 seen them in the most recent meetings.

20 COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: We are going to  
21 try to get them there.

TAKEASHA NEWTON: Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON BREWER: The other question I  
have is just, you know, these tablets that you know,  
are referred to, I've been to Rikers a lot. Can you

1  
2 just talk about whether they, I mean, to me, if  
3 you're going to register, you kind of want to know  
4 what you're registering for. So that would mean that  
5 you need information.

6 So the question is, what is the tablet  
7 situation? Even though some of you mentioned it.

8 Second, do you think, like I do, that  
9 it's one thing to have the information that's at your  
10 fingertips to register, but you'd like to know what  
11 it is that you're registering for?

12 So my question is, just the tablet  
13 situation first, and then second, you know, you need  
14 to have the education that goes with it.

15 So how could those two be better  
16 coordinated?

17 TAKEASHA NEWTON: So the tablets are not  
18 reliable. So, being that they are not reliable, you  
19 want to be able to have direct communication with  
20 another human who is knowledgeable in this area. You  
21 want to have documentation readily available to you.  
And unless we have the Board of Elections officials  
having that direct communication with our  
constituents, we are doing ourselves a disservice.  
Anybody else want to add something?

1  
2           MICHAEL KLINGER: I agree with everything  
3 Ms. Newton said. But I would add that, at Brooklyn  
4 Defenders, we know from working with the people that  
5 we work for, who are in custody at Rikers, that when  
6 they receive a tablet, it depends on factors that we  
7 have very little visibility into.

8           We heard today in the testimony that it's  
9 getting out of intake, out of the MTC+ 30 days, or  
10 maybe it was the 30 days in intake, and then you  
11 become eligible.

12           We've heard in the past, 45 days, we've  
13 heard 60 days. We haven't necessarily observed  
14 anybody getting a tablet on any particular timetable;  
15 however, my guess is that the Department does try to  
16 hit that 30-day mark.

17           But when someone gets a tablet, it is the  
18 easiest thing to lose. And the reason for that, well,  
19 the reasons for that are many. And one of the things  
20 that we heard today, and we've heard it from the  
21 Department before, is that they have a good  
statistic, something like 80% of people who have been  
given a tablet. I think the way they can phrase it is  
80% of people have been given a tablet. Whether or  
not they have that tablet still or access to any

1  
2 tablet is a different question, and they don't  
3 provide a number for that.

4 A significant percentage of the people  
5 that we work with have lost their tablet. The  
6 Department frames it, and even did today in  
7 testimony, as if they "broke" their tablet.

8 I don't think I've met a person who broke  
9 their own tablet. They treasure their tablets. Their  
10 tablets are, among other things, phones that they can  
11 use. They can use those phones to call 311 or to call  
12 for medical. They can use those phones to speak with  
13 family members. These are prized possessions.

14 But what happens is you turn it in to get  
15 it charged, and sometimes it gets given back to  
16 someone who's not you. And that person doesn't have  
17 an incentive to maintain that tablet. And they might  
18 break it. They might--things happen to these tablets.

19 The upshot is that we think that, while  
20 not a totally illusory promise, it's almost there.  
21 The number of people who actually have access to a  
working tablet is small—we believe we don't actually  
know because there was no data on that.

So I would just say that's like a good,  
from my perspective anyway, background to

1  
2 understanding that if there is critical election  
3 information on tablets, the number of people who have  
4 access to it is low.

5 KAI ROSENTHAL: Just to add, the tablets  
6 also, because many individuals have shared and shown  
7 us what's on the tablets, the voter information is at  
8 the very, very bottom. So you have to scroll through  
9 pages and pages of different aspects of life at  
10 Rikers, and voter information is at the bottom. And  
11 then when you click on that, all the outdated  
12 information is at the top. So the way it's organized  
13 is, you know, not beneficial, where it is on the  
14 tablet. And we have asked the Department of  
15 Correction to provide a new tab on the tablet just  
16 for voter information. We've asked for some of this  
17 and have not received, you know, an update.

18 ANTHONY POSADA: Lastly, if I could just  
19 add, a successful civic engagement education program  
20 needs to prioritize meeting people and speaking to  
21 them about the importance of voting, and not just  
claiming to put a poster in a facility and saying  
that that is sufficient as education for them.

1  
2           So we need to actually put people in  
3 place who are speaking to them, and also helping them  
4 once they receive their ballots.

5           Because as we all know, when we go to  
6 vote, we're met with a team of people that are there  
7 to answer our questions, versus when people at Rikers  
8 Island receive their ballots, if they don't fill it  
9 out or they have questions, they can't go to anybody  
10 to help them get answers. Therefore, this also leads  
11 to the gaps in people not filling out their ballots  
12 properly and not being able to vote.

13           And lastly, if I can just go back to your  
14 question earlier about funding, it's not so much that  
15 we don't require it, but we don't have it. Right?  
16 This is a volunteer-based coalition, adding what we  
17 can in terms of the resources that each of our  
18 organizations has to offer, but we don't have it. And  
19 if we did have it, there are possibly more things  
20 that we could be doing to engage even more voters in  
21 New York City jails. Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON BREWER: Thank you. Go ahead?

CHAIRPERSON BROOKS-POWERS: Thank you, and  
thank you for your testimony.

1  
2 I wanted to touch on two different  
3 topics. The first one is logistics and coordination  
4 with DOC and BOE.

5 Are there limitations on which facilities  
6 or units you can visit? And I know we had a Zoom  
7 yesterday, but we would like to get this on the  
8 record as well. Anyone can answer.

9 TAKEASHA NEWTON: Yes, as the Department  
10 of Correction mentioned earlier, we are only given  
11 one day of access a month. Two days, when it is  
12 closer to the June primaries, and two days when it is  
13 closer to the general election in November.

14 CHAIRPERSON BROOKS-POWERS: And are there  
15 any facilities or units you have not been able to  
16 access?

17 KAI ROSENTHAL: In a given year, we seem  
18 to go to each facility once. Occasionally, we go to  
19 them twice.

20 I know earlier the DOC mentioned we go  
21 into Rikers 16 times. I know of only 14 times. As Ms.  
Newton said, once a month, usually two months out of  
the year, we go twice. In April, we are going twice.

So, before the primary, we only go to  
five or six facilities. So four or five facilities

1  
2 are not, you know, no one goes in there to ask if  
3 they want to register to vote, to provide any sort of  
4 voter information or election information.

5 CHAIRPERSON BROOKS-POWERS: And are there  
6 any specific concerns that incarcerated people  
7 mentioned when you interact with them regarding the  
8 registration or voting process?

9 TAKEASHA NEWTON: Yes, as I mentioned  
10 earlier, I have been going into Rikers for six  
11 consecutive years. So I have seen people incarcerated  
12 over and over who have registered with me, completing  
13 a voter registration application and an absentee  
14 ballot. And I have been informed that they have not  
15 received the ballot at all.

16 And I know that they completed the  
17 documents with me, but once we hand the documents  
18 over to the Department of Correction staff, it is  
19 kind of out of our hands.

20 Another issue that I would like to  
21 mention, which I forgot to mention, is this: In 2019  
and in 2020, we have constituents who were denied the  
right to vote, because the absentee ballots that they  
provided were only good for one year. And the  
absentee ballots only have the name of the DOC

1  
2 official who will retrieve them. And these specific  
3 forms that had this DOC official's name, the person  
4 was no longer employed by the Department of  
5 Correction. So those people could not vote.

6 We had to wait until they generated new  
7 absentee ballot forms with a new DOC official's name,  
8 and then those constituents had to sign that new  
9 document in order for them to access a right to a  
10 ballot. And that is a very big issue.

11 CHAIRPERSON BROOKS-POWERS: That's a huge  
12 issue.

13 VICTOR PATE: I would like to add on just  
14 a little bit to that.

15 CHAIRPERSON BROOKS-POWERS: Please.

16 VICTOR PATE: One of the things that I've  
17 heard through the detainees, and they ask me, well,  
18 what's gonna happen, you know, after you all collect  
19 our, you know, documents and stuff?

20 So I basically give them, you know, as  
21 much information as I can in terms of the  
transmittal, what that process is, and when it comes  
time for the election, you will be handed a ballot.

Well, one of the things that a few of  
them told me is that when they did receive their

1  
2 ballots, right? And through program staff or whoever  
3 delivers the balance to them, that they don't have  
4 assistance or help them complete it. Because for a  
5 lot of them, it is the very first time in their life  
6 that they have ever even seen a ballot or actually  
7 ever had the opportunity to vote.

8           So what they have difficulty with,  
9 oftentimes, is completing the actual ballot so that  
10 they can vote. And oftentimes, it's a frustrating  
11 process for them to have somebody give you something  
12 and say, "Here. Here's your ballot, now fill it out."  
13 You've never seen a ballot before in your life. The  
14 only thing you know is that people came some months  
15 earlier, had you fill out the voter registration and  
16 absentee ballot, and now here it is, and you actually  
17 have the ballot, but then there's nobody there to  
18 assist you or help you with completing that process.

19           That, to me, defeats the purpose of what  
20 we do to enfranchise people. And without that  
21 additional measure of help or assistance in  
22 direction, you're still not voting. So that's a lost  
23 vote.

24           So to me, that's a system that needs to  
25 have a little bit more assistance, and once they get

1  
2 the ballots, they do have assistance, if they need  
3 it, for them to complete the ballots.

4 CHAIRPERSON BROOKS-POWERS: Thank you for  
5 that as well.

6 Pivoting to current challenges and ideas  
7 for improvement, what challenges are there in  
8 collecting the completed registration forms from  
9 incarcerated individuals? And have you noticed  
10 particular events in the process?

11 And I know you gave us somewhat of an  
12 example, but where the ballots or registration forms  
13 are most often rejected or otherwise delayed, is  
14 there a pattern that you see for a certain dynamic  
15 that leads to them being rejected or delayed by any  
16 chance?

17 VICTOR PATE: Well, I think I can just  
18 speak to a small portion of that.

19 CHAIRPERSON BROOKS-POWERS: Mm-hmm?

20 VICTOR PATE: From our perspective, our  
21 process is that once we complete the ballots and  
everything is done, we review them to make sure  
they're filled out properly and correctly. And we  
hold them until we finish the process for the day. At

1  
2 the end of that particular process, we turn it over  
3 to DOC.

4 Now, the process from that point on, I  
5 have no clue. I really don't. Honestly, I don't know  
6 what happens after that. But there is supposed to be  
7 a timeframe from which that particular point when we  
8 finished registration for that day, hand it to the  
9 DOC employees, then the next process of transmittal  
10 happens. Now, what that timeline is, I have no clue,  
11 because they never say, we're going to take these to  
12 be BOE within this particular time.

13 CHAIRPERSON BROOKS-POWERS: Are there any  
14 timestamps, or does the Coalition do any form of  
15 tracking? Like, you probably don't have a copy per  
16 se, but is there a system in which you have a list of  
17 who you sat with, who you've gotten to complete, or  
18 make these requests that you are able to follow up?  
19 And is there a way of time stamping that? Because I'm  
20 just trying to figure out-- it seems like there is a  
21 process happening, but it's not a full loop in a  
sense.

1

TAKEASHA NEWTON: You are so accurate.

2

I personally created a document so that  
3 we can actually track the names of people, track who  
4 completed an absentee ballot, and who completed a  
5 registration form. Sometimes people will say, "I'm  
6 already registered, and I voted prior to becoming  
7 detained." And we will inform them that, okay, in  
8 that case, you only need to complete an absentee  
9 ballot.

9

We created this form and sent it in. But  
10 DOC denied it. What I found is that we have staff who  
11 work for the Department of Correction, who create  
12 their own agenda along the way, and they make their  
13 own rules along the way. Why would you not want to  
14 use this document that can actually track how many  
15 people we interacted with throughout the day?

10

11

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18

Now, yes, I take a general mental note of  
15 how many people we register when we are there, but as  
16 far as the proof of the documentation, as I  
17 mentioned, the Department of Correction has denied us  
18 bringing in those materials.

19

20

KAI ROSENTHAL: Just to add to that—there  
19 is very little transparency in what happens to the  
20 voter registration...

21

1

CHAIRPERSON BROOKS-POWERS: I'm sure.

2

3

KAI ROSENTHAL: and absentee ballot  
applications once we have turned them over to the  
Department of Correction.

4

5

We don't know when they are delivered to  
the Board of Elections, when ballots might be picked  
up before, whether it be special elections,  
primaries, or general elections. We have asked for  
that information.

6

7

8

9

And I found it somewhat alarming, earlier  
during the DOC's testimony, because they seem not to  
understand their own process of when they do deliver  
it to the Board of Elections.

10

11

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The person who was responsible for civic  
engagement at Rikers previously, who's no longer  
there, told us directly that he delivered the voter  
registration and absentee ballot applications on a  
Monday, and he would pick up the absentee ballots on  
a Thursday. Obviously, that would be before an  
election when the ballots were available. So that was  
the process that we were told. But in terms of  
numbers and all of that, we have very little  
transparency.

1  
2 CHAIRPERSON BROOKS-POWERS: Is there  
3 anything you think the Council could do to improve  
4 access to the franchise for incarcerated people?  
5 Legislatively, is there anything specific, whether it  
6 be the legislation we're hearing today, or if there's  
7 legislation that could take us further on the  
8 conversation?

9 VICTOR PATE: If we could get multiple  
10 sites at Rikers Island-- we say a polling site a lot.  
11 And some people have interpreted that as having one  
12 polling machine that, you know, incarcerated  
13 individuals need to go to. And I'm not just talking  
14 about setting up in one gym, I'm talking about in all  
15 the buildings. So we need to have an eye on that.  
16 That it's not just one-- that gets mentioned a lot,  
17 and it was mentioned in the meeting we had yesterday  
18 when an individual noted one polling machine wouldn't  
19 help.

20 Of course, we want multiple polling  
21 machines. But just want to put this in the ethos,  
what the City Council could do is prioritize New York  
as being a leader once again, and expanding the role  
of democracy.

1  
2 We live in a great country where America  
3 has a great position in the world, and it's being a  
4 little distorted now, but within that, New York  
5 itself has always led in expanding democracy. I think  
6 it would go a long way toward reestablishing that if  
7 we say to the world that individuals who are being  
8 held in custody have this access to voting.

9 So I just want to put that into the  
10 atmosphere, because I think that can be a guiding  
11 force. New York has always led in expanding  
12 democracy, and we should make an effort to return to  
13 that. I just want to say that.

14 KAI ROSENTHAL: I think also just adding  
15 to the poll site, uh, the desire for a poll site at  
16 Rikers, is requiring some sort of civic education and  
17 information on a sustained, ongoing basis at Rikers.  
18 So, not the presentation that they, you know,  
19 referenced earlier in their testimony, but something  
20 that is geared toward those who are in their care,  
21 that is offered monthly or on some sort of ongoing  
regular basis.

TAKEASHA NEWTON: I also just wanted to  
add that, until we get a polling site at our city  
jails, it would be accommodating if the Vote in NYC

1  
2 Jails Coalition leaders were able to take the voting  
3 registration forms and the absentee ballots directly  
4 to the Board of Elections without the DOC interfering  
5 with that process.

6 KAI ROSENTHAL: And just on that point,  
7 as I understand it from some of my League of Women  
8 Voters colleagues across the state, when they  
9 register voters in county jails, they actually are  
10 the individuals who deliver them directly to the  
11 Board of Elections. It's not the local sheriff.

12 CHAIRPERSON BROOKS-POWERS: Thank you.

13 PANEL: Thank you.

14 CHAIRPERSON BROOKS-POWERS: Thank you,  
15 Chair.

16 CHAIRPERSON BREWER: One quick question  
17 about language, obviously not everyone speaks  
18 English, so are you able-- do you have enough people  
19 who speak different languages? Do you have the  
20 Language Line? Probably not. So, how do you handle  
21 those who are not proficient in English? Obviously,  
some are not citizens, but there are many who are. So  
how do you handle that?

1  
2 TAKEASHA NEWTON: We do have the voter  
3 registration and absentee ballot forms in other  
4 languages that we take in with us.

5 CHAIRPERSON BREWER: But you don't  
6 necessarily have the language of the person, but you  
7 definitely have the material in different languages?

8 TAKEASHA NEWTON: We have the materials,  
9 and we do have people who speak English and Spanish.

10 CHAIRPERSON BREWER: Okay. And then what  
11 about the flimsy pens that are a problem? Because you  
12 have the pens that you sign with... (CROSS-TALK)

13 TAKEASHA NEWTON: Thank you...

14 CHAIRPERSON BREWER: That doesn't match  
15 the signature necessarily. Are you allowed to bring--  
16 I am never allowed to bring in a pen. Are you allowed  
17 to bring in a regular pen?

18 TAKEASHA NEWTON: Thank you so very much  
19 for raising that question. I really tried to collect  
20 some of those pens to bring in with me today, so that  
21 you can see how much... (CROSS-TALK)

CHAIRPERSON BREWER: I know what they look  
like.

TAKEASHA NEWTON: of a hardship it is. And  
it is actually a ridiculous rule to have, when you

1  
2 actually have some people who are detained there, who  
3 can tell me, hold on a minute, and walk to their bed  
4 and collect their own pen, and come back to sign the  
5 form.

6 So, I really don't see the issue with  
7 even giving us those ridiculous pens to have someone  
8 use so that their signatures don't match two forms  
9 they are completing at the very same time.

10 CHAIRPERSON BREWER: We will work on the  
11 pens.

12 TAKEASHA NEWTON: Thank you.

13 CHAIRPERSON BREWER: Thank you very much  
14 to this panel. Thank you so much.

15 CHAIRPERSON BROOKS-POWERS: Thank you.

16 (PAUSE)

17 CHAIRPERSON BREWER: So now we'll move to  
18 public testimony. If you wish to speak at today's  
19 hearing, I'm going to say the same thing I said  
20 earlier— Fill out an appearance card with the  
21 Sergeant at Arms.

When you are recognized, you'll have  
three minutes to speak at the hearing.

Please provide a copy of your statement  
or additional testimony to the Sergeant at Arms if

1  
2 you have one. If you don't, and you want to email  
3 written testimony, you may do so at  
4 testimony@council.nyc.gov within 72 hours of the  
5 close of this hearing.

6 Audio and video recordings will not be  
7 accepted.

8 I now invite Clyanna Lightbourn, Jan  
9 Combopiano, Jarret Berg, Pharien Griffith, and Karen  
10 Wharton.

11 Whoever would like to begin, go ahead.

12 PHARIEN GRIFFITH: Good afternoon, Chairs  
13 Brewer and Brooks-Powers, and Members of the  
14 Committee.

15 My name is Pharien Griffith, and I am the  
16 Chair of Civic Engagement at the New York Branch of  
17 the NAACP, the first charter branch of the oldest  
18 civil rights organization in the country that has  
19 championed voting rights since its inception. We, the  
20 Branch, are a member of the Vote in NYC Jails  
21 Coalition. On behalf of the NAACP New York State  
22 Conference, we thank you for hosting this hearing and  
23 for the opportunity to testify today.

24 Although New York State has not taken  
25 away the voting rights of those awaiting trial, it

1  
2 sure seems that way when there isn't a meaningful or  
3 permanent way for eligible voters who are  
4 incarcerated for non-felony convictions or awaiting  
5 trial to exercise their right to vote.

6 We understand, as with nursing homes,  
7 that eligible incarcerated voters would vote via the  
8 absentee ballot. However, the absentee ballot voting  
9 process is less of a permanent way of voting and less  
10 engaging with the voters, with results like 335 votes  
11 out of 7,000 in the 2025 election, and that's only  
12 due to the work of the Vote in NYC Jails Coalition.

13 Only one name or one person's name can be  
14 authorized to pick up or receive absentee ballots on  
15 behalf of a voter based on New York's election law.  
16 So if a designated person is out on vacation or out  
17 sick, voters cannot receive the absentee ballot,  
18 which means they can't vote.

19 Recently, there was a special election in  
20 February for two districts in Manhattan and one in  
21 Queens, but no one housed on Rikers Island voted or  
knew about them, mainly because the designated person  
now works alongside the Commissioner. How are voters  
to know there's an election if the DOC is in control  
of voting?

1  
2 In my role with the Public Advocate's  
3 Office, I brought in the Board of Election while  
4 working at the Public Advocate's Office as a Civic  
5 and Community Empowerment Organizer, I brought them  
6 into the conversation because the DOC kept making  
7 excuses about how they received ballots and why they  
8 have to go and pick up the ballots and they call the  
9 day before and we got to pick it up tomorrow. And I  
10 know that was not true as a former BOE employee  
11 myself.

12 The Board of Elections oversees elections  
13 for all voters not housed at Rikers Island, so why  
14 wouldn't the BOE oversee elections on Rikers Island?

15 A civilian employee on Rikers Island  
16 oversees the voting—an employee who doesn't know or  
17 understand election laws, an employee who may not be  
18 an avid voter themselves, who may not care if those  
19 held on Rikers even vote. (TIMER)

20 Can I just...

21 CHAIRPERSON BREWER: Yeah, go ahead,  
please.

PHARIEN GRIFFITH: Okay.

The Vote in NYC Jails Coalition has  
worked very hard to establish a working relationship

1  
2 with DOC to make sure the eligible voters get to  
3 exercise their right to vote. However, it is the DOC  
4 that determines the days the Coalition gets to engage  
5 with voters.

6 In addition to voting, there is also  
7 voter education, and voters should know which elected  
8 offices they are voting for and which ballot  
9 measures.

10 The Coalition's partnership with Campaign  
11 Finance NYC Votes makes the little education that is  
12 taking place possible. It is the Coalition. The DOC  
13 who testified today made it seem that they have a  
14 working relationship with the Board of Elections, and  
15 they do not. They have a working relationship with  
16 the Coalition, and I'll save the rest.

17 CHAIRPERSON BREWER: Thank you very much.

18 Next, all right, wherever you want to  
19 start, go ahead.

20 JARRET BERG: Good Afternoon, Chairs  
21 Brooks-Powers and Brewer, and Members of the New York  
City Council. My name is Jarret Berg, Co-Founder and  
Voting Rights Counsel at VoteEarlyNY.

I am here today to highlight the glaring  
voter access injustice burdening thousands of our

1  
2 fellow citizens detained pretrial and presumed  
3 innocent or serving for misdemeanor offenses who  
4 retain their fundamental right to vote; share what  
5 I've observed about the slow-but-steady quest to  
6 overhaul and modernize the worst attributes of New  
7 York election law; and to urge the New York City  
8 Council to pass a resolution calling on Albany  
9 lawmakers to enact the Democracy During Detention  
10 Act, along with Intros 786 and 797. For DDDA, it is  
11 important that the Council act before lawmakers leave  
12 in June.

13 This comprehensive framework has the  
14 potential to significantly improve equitable and  
15 effective access to the ballot for more than 12,000  
16 New Yorkers in custody who we estimate are eligible  
17 to vote, roughly half of whom are held in New York  
18 City facilities.

19 The DDDA codifies the right to vote for  
20 detained citizens who have not been disenfranchised  
21 and requires local election and correction officials  
to put together a robust, well-resourced voter  
registration, language access, and balloting program  
for Rikers and successor facilities ahead of  
elections.

1  
2 To date, the DDDA proposal, championed by  
3 former Senate Elections Chair Myrie and Assembly  
4 Election Law Chair Walker, has garnered support from  
5 more than 30 local, state, and national voting and  
6 civil rights organizations. The bill is backed by 18  
7 Senate Sponsors and 33 Assembly Sponsors; is a 2026  
8 priority of both the Let NY Vote Coalition and the  
9 BIPOC Democracy Table; and is included as a 2026  
10 legislative priority of the Democratic Election  
11 Commissioner's Caucus of the state Election  
12 Commissioners Association. (NYSECA)

11 According to the Vera Institute, the  
12 Snapshot of the NYC Jail Population of the 6,631  
13 persons in custody at Rikers, more than 88% of the  
14 population is Black or Latinx, and the vast majority  
15 are being held pretrial. This is not an aberration;  
16 the data is frustratingly persistent. For decades,  
17 these communities have been disproportionately  
18 represented in New York City jails.

17 In addition, because of New York City's  
18 incredible language diversity, the absence of a  
19 modern voter access program for Rikers perpetuates a  
20 significant additional barrier to participation among  
21

1  
2 New Yorkers in DOC custody with limited English  
3 proficiency.

4           When enacted, the Democracy During  
5 Detention Act will bring language-related assistance  
6 in voting as required by the New York Voting Rights  
7 Act to Rikers, as well as coordination with the Civic  
8 Engagement Commission's poll site language assistance  
9 program to the extent justified by the needs of the  
10 voters actually in DOC facilities.

11           Additionally, a DDDA-compliant voter  
12 access plan must include planning for and allocation  
13 of resources like assistive devices and reasonable  
14 accommodations for persons with disabilities,  
15 consistent with that provided to voters who are not  
16 detained.

17           I know I am out of time, so I just want  
18 to close by asking the Council (TIMER) to call on the  
19 State to enact the Democracy while in Detention Act,  
20 and welcome your questions.

21           CHAIRPERSON BREWER: Thank you.

          CLYANNA LIGHTBOURN: Good afternoon.

          Dear Chairpersons Brewer and  
Brooks-Powers, and Members of the New York City  
Council Committees on Governmental Operations, State

1  
2 and Federal Legislation, and Criminal Justice: Thank  
3 you so much for the opportunity to testify today.

4 My name is Clyanna Lightbourn, and I'm  
5 Campaign Director for the League of Women Voters of  
6 New York State, where I lead our work on the  
7 Democracy During Detention Act, legislation that  
8 would require Board of Elections, not Correction  
9 staff, to take responsibility for voting access in  
10 local jails across New York State.

11 Last year, I had the opportunity to visit  
12 Rikers Island with the Vote in NYC Jails Coalition.  
13 Getting in took over an hour and a half, though I  
14 submitted my name previously with my colleagues; my  
15 name wasn't in the system, which held us up multiple  
16 times. We traded our licenses for yellow cards,  
17 carried clear backpacks, and explained our reason for  
18 being there more times than I can count.

19 Being driven onto that island via bus, I  
20 found myself staring at the sprawling LaGuardia  
21 Airport right next door: planes are lifting off,  
22 carrying people home toward family, towards somewhere  
23 they choose to go, right next to that, close enough  
24 to feel the hum of it, were young people whose world

1  
2 had shrunk to the size of a housing unit; where the  
3 future keeps leaving without them on it.

4 We went to the juvenile unit that day,  
5 split into two teams, and spent hours going floor to  
6 floor in one building on an island with nine  
7 facilities. Many of these young men had never thought  
8 of themselves as voters. One realized they still had  
9 a voice in what happens to their community, and I  
10 could see the spark come back to their eyes. And this  
11 is what civic education looks like when it reaches  
12 someone for the first time. And it's proof of how far  
13 we still have to go because we only reached a  
14 fraction of the people we needed that day.

15 According to the New York State Division  
16 of Criminal Justice Services, over 6,000 people are  
17 held at Rikers Island. According to the Vera  
18 Institute of Justice, 86% of people in New York City  
19 jails are being held pretrial, which means they've  
20 not been convicted of anything. The vast majority  
21 retain the right to vote. And yet, according to the  
Legal Aid Society, which coordinates the Vote in NYC  
Jails program, fewer than 550 have cast a ballot on  
Rikers in 2024. That's over 6,000 people and less

1  
2 than 1,000 votes counted in that nine-facility  
3 island.

4 Ten years ago, this council passed a  
5 Local Law which required Department of Correction to  
6 run a voting program at Rikers, but Correction was  
7 never built to run elections. What Rikers needs, and  
8 what every jail in this state needs, is the Board of  
9 Elections at the table, election professionals with a  
10 plan accountable to the public, showing up before  
11 every election.

12 This is exactly what the Democracy During  
13 Detention Act would require statewide. And New York  
14 must not only defend our democracy, but we must  
15 fortify it; that means ensuring every eligible voter  
16 can actually cast a ballot no matter where they are,  
17 and passing this resolution is how we take that step.  
18 Thank you.

19 CHAIRPERSON BREWER: Thank you very much.  
20 Next?

21 JAN COMBOPIANO: Thank you. Good  
afternoon, I am Jan Combopiano with Brooklyn Voters  
Alliance. I am here to also urge the Council to pass  
a resolution in strong support of Democracy During  
Detention.

1  
2           What we've heard today is that 10 years  
3 after the Council passed the law tasking the  
4 Department of Correction with facilitating voting, is  
5 that it created an obligation, but not a system that  
6 works. And we are all here today because we think  
7 every voter matters and every vote counts, even on  
8 Rikers.

9           I'm also a poll worker. I have managed a  
10 poll site for more than five years, and when I hear  
11 people talking about absentee ballots as if they're  
12 not real, it just really annoys me. So, I want to  
13 talk about what a poll site means.

14           An in-person absentee poll site is a real  
15 poll site, and what makes it a real poll site is the  
16 Board of Elections taking responsibility for voting  
17 and election administration. To do that, state-level  
18 action is essential. The BOE is a state ministerial  
19 agency. Ballot access in all elections, city, state,  
20 and federal, is governed by state election law. For  
21 voting access to be consistent and enforceable across  
all the jails in New York City, state election law  
must be amended.

          We've talked about curing. Curing mostly  
is about the absentee ballot envelope, whether it's

1  
2 signed, whether it's sealed. But we haven't talked  
3 about something that actually happens inside a poll  
4 site, and that is, if you mess up your ballot, you  
5 get two more ballots, right? You can void that ballot  
6 and get a new one. But you can't do that with  
7 volunteers. You have to do that with trained people  
8 who know election law.

9  
10 When folks are going to have a poll site,  
11 hopefully at Rikers and/or in the borough-based  
12 jails, there will be people who need affidavit  
13 ballots. Those are also legal documents that need to  
14 be filled out correctly, so they require training.

15  
16 I'm going to use my last 30 seconds to  
17 ask for three things:

18  
19 One, please pass this resolution in  
20 support of Democracy During Detention.

21  
22 Second, I'm going to echo what Kai  
23 mentioned and mandate civic education. It's not  
24 enough to say that the Campaign Finance Board puts  
25 the voter guide on somebody's tablet. They don't put  
26 *their* voter guide on the tablet; they put the general  
27 city voter guide on the tablet. And what we've heard  
28 (TIMER) is that people need that in-person  
29 conversation to help them.

1  
2           Lastly, please, please, please be  
3 proactive about the borough-based jails. They are  
4 being built. I can see the Brooklyn one coming up  
5 every day. We need to mandate that there will be a  
6 poll site at every single one of them. Thank you.

6           KAREN WHARTON: Good afternoon, Chairs  
7 Brooks-Powers and Brewer, and Members of both  
8 Committees. My name is Karen Wharton, and I am  
9 Legislative Director of Citizen Action of New York  
10 and Convenor of the NY BIPOC Democracy Table, a  
11 statewide coalition of Black, Indigenous, and people  
12 of color-led organizations at the forefront of  
13 democracy reforms.

14           For over 40 years, Citizen Action of New  
15 York has organized working people, immigrants, and  
16 communities of color across New York State. We fought  
17 for rights restoration for formerly incarcerated New  
18 Yorkers; we fought for a clean slate; and I sit  
19 before you today as a continuation of that work,  
20 making sure that every New Yorker who has the legal  
21 right to vote can actually cast a ballot. And that is  
why I urge the New York City Council to pass a  
resolution in support of the Democracy During  
Detention Act, bill number S.440/A.2121.

1  
2 This legislation ensures that eligible  
3 voters who are detained in local jails have access to  
4 the ballot. The Committee of Governmental Operations  
5 oversees the Board of Elections and the Voter  
6 Assistance Commission and exists to advance state  
7 legislation on behalf of the City. The Committee of  
8 Criminal Justice oversees the Department of  
9 Correction. Together, you have the jurisdiction this  
10 bill requires.

11 According to the 2023 report by the Data  
12 Collaborative for Justice at John Jay College, just  
13 40 of New York City's 178 zip codes account for 60%  
14 of New York City jail admissions. The majority are  
15 concentrated in the Bronx and Central and South  
16 Brooklyn. These are not random zip codes. As of 2022,  
17 Black New Yorkers made up 61% of the City's jail  
18 population, while comprising just 22% of the general  
19 population. In 92% of New York City zip codes, Black  
20 residents are admitted to the city jails at a higher  
21 rate than their share of the neighborhood population.

22 Many of you represent the very  
23 neighborhoods' most impacted districts that are  
24 ground zero for this issue—Tremont and Morrisania in  
25 the Bronx, Brownsville, East New York, and Ocean Hill

1  
2 in Brooklyn. These neighborhoods are among the top 10  
3 zip codes citywide for jail admissions. The  
4 communities most harmed by pretrial detention across  
5 the state have representation at this table. This is  
6 not a coincidence. (TIMER)

7  
8 This is-- May I go on? There's not too  
9 much more.

10  
11 This is not a coincidence. This is an  
12 opportunity. And these are not statistics that are  
13 just spouted about strangers; they're about us, about  
14 our families, our friends, neighbors, people whose  
15 names we know. They're your constituents. They're  
16 legally innocent and still have the right to vote.

17  
18 And we know that these statistics extend  
19 beyond New York City. Across the state, Black and  
20 Latino communities, already underserved and  
21 underrepresented, bear the disproportionate burden of  
pretrial detention. Every detained eligible voter who  
misses an election is a tier in their community's  
civic fabric...

18  
19 CHAIRPERSON BREWER: Please start to wrap  
20 up.

21  
KAREN WHARTON: Yes.

1  
2           So, Democracy During Detention fixes a  
3 lot of these problems statewide. So you have the  
4 power today to go on record in support of this bill,  
5 and I ask you to do so, please. Thank you.

6           CHAIRPERSON BREWER: Thank you very much.  
7 Do you have some sense, those of you who are working  
8 in Albany, that this bill is going to pass, or has it  
9 been on the board for a while, et cetera? Just give  
10 us a sense of this. I know we talked about it  
11 yesterday during the phone call.

12           JAN COMBOPIANO: Yes, I will start.

13           This bill has only been around for a  
14 couple of years. So the fact that it has so much  
15 support, and support from the election commissioners,  
16 it also has money in the budget from the Assembly  
17 side. So there is a general sense of support. I will  
18 leave it to these two to talk about any specifics.  
19 But the fact is that it has only been two years, and  
20 they are already planning for it to be implemented.  
21 That's pretty amazing.

          CHAIRPERSON BREWER: Thank you.

          CLYANNA LIGHTBOURN: Yes, to follow up  
with that, we're elated to see that there's movement  
in the Assembly and the Senate. The Assembly, as Jan

1 mentioned, has set aside \$500,000 in their budget.

2 And the Senate Elections Committee, where the bill is  
3 currently sitting, will actually be convening next  
4 week to move that forward. So we are very excited.

5 We have a growing number of cosponsors,  
6 both in the Assembly and the Senate, who are adding  
7 their voices to this need that we are going to the  
8 budget with, of saying that this needs to stay in the  
9 budget, and it needs to pass this year.

10 CHAIRPERSON BREWER: Thank you. Anybody  
11 else?

12 KAREN WHARTON: Well, I do believe your  
13 support will really help.

14 CHAIRPERSON BREWER: No, we understand. We  
15 heard you loud and clear.

16 (LAUGHTER)

17 CHAIRPERSON BREWER: Thank you.

18 KAREN WHARTON: (LAUGHS) Well, just in  
19 case. We want to make sure...

20 (LAUGHTER)

21 CHAIRPERSON BREWER: Thank you.  
(INAUDIBLE) loud and clear on it.

CHAIRPERSON BREWER: I am going to turn it  
over to my colleague.

1  
2 CHAIRPERSON BROOKS-POWERS: Thank you,  
3 Chair.

4 So if you could just answer, uh, just  
5 picking up on your testimony from before, how come  
6 the Department of Corrections has 16 days for voter  
7 registration? What's the significance of that number,  
8 if any?

9 PHARIEN GRIFFITH: That was curious, and I  
10 was surprised that no one picked up on it because  
11 they kept mentioning 16. It's only once-- It's  
12 usually only once a month. But for 2024, we know that  
13 there were four elections. Right? We had the  
14 Presidential Primary in April, the Federal and State  
15 in June, and the General. The Coalition had to be  
16 adamant in saying, "Hey, we need to get more voter  
17 registration days on the calendar, because we have  
18 these upcoming elections, in addition to the party  
19 change on February 14th." So, I was curious as to why  
20 they kept saying 16 days. It shouldn't be a set date.  
21 It should coincide with what election is taking  
place. Because, in February, we just saw that there  
was an election that took place where no one was able  
to vote. You asked the question about special  
elections, Chair Brooks-Powers, and they couldn't

1  
2 properly answer that. We just had a few in February,  
3 and we made a big issue about that, the Coalition,  
4 when we had our monthly meeting. And the Board of  
5 Elections, as was already mentioned in testimony,  
6 hasn't been in the meetings since October.

7  
8 CHAIRPERSON BROOKS-POWERS: Thank you for  
9 that. It's clear that more work needs to be done  
10 around that space of protecting the right to vote for  
11 those who are in custody.

12  
13 PHARIEN GRIFFITH: And I just want to go  
14 on the record to say that the NAACP State Conference  
15 is supporting Democracy During Detention as well.

16  
17 CHAIRPERSON BROOKS-POWERS: Thank you.

18  
19 CHAIRPERSON BREWER: Thank you very much.  
20 You all are fabulous, thank you so much.

21  
22 The next panel will be Amira Wittenberg,  
23 Zachary Katznelson, and Barbara Wooten. Whoever would  
24 like to begin, go ahead.

25  
26 AMIRA WITTENBERG: Thank you, Chair  
27 Brooks-Powers and Chair Brewer, for holding today's  
28 joint hearing about voting on the Rikers Island Jail  
29 Complex.

30  
31 My name is Amira Wittenberg, and I attend  
32 the Silberman School of Social Work. I am completing

1  
2 my MSW internship at the Katal Center for Equity,  
3 Health, and Justice.

4 In the first year of my Master's program,  
5 I entered the Department of Correction Programs and  
6 Community Partnerships Division on Rikers Island.  
7 Part of this included working on the initiative to  
8 provide voter registration materials and absentee  
9 ballots to people detained on Rikers Island.

10 This program was deeply understaffed and  
11 run by one DOC employee and two MSW interns. With  
12 this limited capacity, we were only able to visit a  
13 few units on Rikers at a time, meeting incarcerated  
14 individuals who were continuously falling through the  
15 cracks.

16 When we visited the units, responses were  
17 positive, and we engaged in meaningful conversations  
18 about civic engagement and the importance of voting.  
19 However, the program was dependent on a small number  
20 of people to hand deliver voting materials to  
21 approximately 6,000 people at the time, making voting  
largely inaccessible. Election time proved to be an  
even bigger challenge, as we needed to bring absentee  
ballots to all the people who had registered to vote.  
This was simply not feasible.

1  
2           Based on my experience, the current  
3 absentee ballot program is failing. In 2024, fewer  
4 than 8% of incarcerated people at Rikers Island  
5 voted. Over 85% of people incarcerated on Rikers  
6 Island have not been convicted, meaning they are  
7 eligible to vote, but they are actively denied that  
8 right.

9           We're here today with the Vote in NYC  
10 Jail's Coalition to demand that the Board of  
11 Elections address infringement on the rights of  
12 incarcerated people by installing polling sites at  
13 all New York City jails moving forward. Creating  
14 polling sites will help ensure that incarcerated  
15 people can exercise their right to vote.

16           The City must also take action to address  
17 the dangerous conditions at Rikers and pass a budget  
18 that fulfills its commitment to shutting down Rikers.

19           We urge this council to ensure the voting  
20 rights of incarcerated people are protected and use  
21 its budgetary power to advance the closure of Rikers.  
Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON BREWER: Thank you. Next?

ZACHARY KATZNELSON: Hi, Chairs. Good  
afternoon. I'm Zachary Katznelson with the

1  
2 Independent Rikers Commission. I'm here in that  
3 capacity—I'm also here as somebody who's been  
4 volunteering with voter registration at Rikers  
5 probably since about 2017, including as recently as  
6 last week.

7 It feels like this program-- we know that  
8 the law obligates DOC to provide anyone who's  
9 registered with an absentee ballot, and everyone  
10 who's leaving Rikers is supposed to get voter  
11 registration materials.

12 Now, I think hopefully Commissioner  
13 Richards is starting to change this, right? It's a  
14 new day at DOC, and thank God that's the case. He's  
15 there, but it feels like he speaks about reentry on  
16 day one. I mean, voting is a key part of reentry.  
17 It's a key part of what happens while people are  
18 incarcerated. Because people feel valued and  
19 valuable, but that means a tremendous amount, because  
20 people feel forgotten in Rikers, feel isolated in  
21 Rikers. Being engaged means so much. And this is one  
critical way to do it.

So if reentry starts on day one, for  
instance, why isn't part of the intake process  
asking, "Are you registered to vote?" "If not, would

1  
2 you like to register?" "Do you need an absentee  
3 ballot?" That should be a question straight away. It  
4 shouldn't wait until volunteers come in. It makes me  
5 think, listening here, and even when I go to Rikers  
6 to do this, it's like George Bush and his "Thousand  
7 points of light," there's no way for civil society  
8 and volunteers to fill in the gap of what government  
9 has the scale and the scope to do.

8           As hard as this coalition works to fight  
9 to get in 12-14 days a year at Rikers, it's not  
10 possible at all. Last week, we got to six housing  
11 areas, six total. And that's one of the 12 or 14  
12 days, that's it. So we, you know, a couple of hundred  
13 people we had the possibility to talk to, right? It's  
14 not possible to reach everyone.

14           It's not just-- by the way, when I think  
15 about numbers too, there's 6,700 people or so at  
16 Rikers, let's say 5,000 or 6,000 are eligible for the  
17 vote. But there are 25,000 people who are admitted to  
18 Rikers every year, right? So you're talking maybe  
19 20,000 people that could be reached to register to  
20 vote at some point during the year. It's a huge scale  
21 that one coalition, no matter how hard working the  
volunteers are, is not going to be able to meet.

1  
2           And one thing that came up repeatedly is  
3 literacy. People sometimes struggle with reading and  
4 writing. And that's how critical it is for somebody  
5 to be there in person to help them, whether a  
6 volunteer, a poll worker, or whoever it might be, to  
7 help them with the process.

8           And I just want to also note, you know,  
9 we're talking about Rikers, but the law also allows  
10 pre-registration for 16 and 17-year-olds. What would  
11 happen at Horizon and Crossroads? To my knowledge,  
12 there is no program there at all to pre-register  
13 people to vote while they're there. That's a  
14 tremendous opportunity, both for civic education and  
15 to register people to vote, that the City is missing  
16 right now. Thank you.

17           CHAIRPERSON BREWER: Gosh, thank you,  
18 both.

19           I have a question for a social worker. I  
20 love social workers. My question is, can you just be  
21 a little bit more specific about what your experience  
was with the program person? So we understand you  
mentioned some of the challenges, but if you could be  
more specific, because we've heard from the

1  
2 volunteers, but not necessarily from the people  
3 assisting the DOC staff.

4 AMIRA WITTENBERG: Yes, definitely.

5 So many of the same challenges that the  
6 volunteers were facing, we also faced. It was a  
7 challenge to fill out the paperwork to get  
8 volunteers. And so that's why we weren't able to  
9 bring in volunteers as often as we would like.

10 I saw challenges in terms of the fact  
11 that it was just me, my supervisor, and sometimes one  
12 other intern who were responsible for an entire group  
13 of volunteers. We had our DOC ID, so we were able to  
14 go around. I was able to branch off and take a group  
15 of volunteers on my own. But still, this was like a  
16 small group. So we just were really not able to  
17 access so many people. We would only end up being  
18 able to visit a few units at a time.

19 And in terms of actually taking the  
20 ballots after, I know this was asked, we would try to  
21 take the ballots on the same day, but...

CHAIRPERSON BREWER: To the Board of  
Elections?

AMIRA WITTENBERG: Yes. But,  
unfortunately, sometimes it was just not possible.

1  
2 CHAIRPERSON BREWER: So, from the best of  
3 your knowledge, somebody from DOC, the next day, or  
4 the next day, or the next day would take them to  
5 Queens to the Board of Elections? But you never  
6 really knew when?

7 AMIRA WITTENBERG: Yes. I did not go, but  
8 someone would take them.

9 CHAIRPERSON BREWER: Okay.

10 AMIRA WITTENBERG: My supervisor.

11 CHAIRPERSON BREWER: And what about my  
12 technology questions that you heard earlier? There  
13 has to be a better way. So, I think it's great when  
14 you enter, not to mention the juveniles; that's a  
15 great idea, too. But, it seems to me that not only  
16 should you be asked, but there must be some way to  
17 also get your AD or ED once you have the address. Not  
18 everybody has an address. I understand that. And if  
19 you are in a shelter, which a lot of people are, you  
20 may not go back to the same shelter. So, there are  
21 some address issues. But, how would you suggest-- you  
ask if they are registered. Some people may not even  
know what that means. So, give us a little sense of  
what you think that would look like. And is there  
some way that technology could play a role? I mean, I

1  
2 call a hotel, and I can't get a human being. You get  
3 this A.I. person that tells you whether you have-- I  
4 mean, it just seems to me that we could be doing  
5 better on the technology front.

6           ZACHARY KATZNELSON: A 100 percent. For  
7 instance, someone could look up their voter  
8 registration status. Right? Are you registered? Where  
9 are you registered? What address are you registered  
10 at? Maybe you have someone registered, but they have  
11 moved since then. So, there are lots of ways they can  
12 be looked at. And the fact is that it's only DOC  
13 staff, Correctional Health Services, or DOC that has  
14 computer access. Right? A person who is incarcerated  
15 is not going to be able to look online to check their  
16 status. They need someone from the Department to help  
17 them. So I think that would be an opportunity, when  
18 they are going through the intake, okay, I will look  
19 it up and see where you're registered. Then,  
20 obviously, there has to be some coordination with the  
21 programs folks, who are then going to be saying,  
okay, whether it is a special election or otherwise--  
and that issue about specific information about who  
is running in your district. Right? Especially, for  
instance, judges, right? How do you learn about that

1  
2 in your area? Right? In your borough. So I think it  
3 is really important that we dial down exactly what  
4 you are saying, what's your election district, what's  
5 your assembly district? But that is easily attainable  
6 if someone takes the time to look.

6 CHAIRPERSON BREWER: Thank you both very  
7 much.

7 ZACHARY KATZNELSON: Yep.

8 CHAIRPERSON BREWER: I really appreciate  
9 it, thank you.

10 ZACHARY KATZNELSON: Of course. Thanks so  
11 much for this hearing.

12 CHAIRPERSON BREWER: We have two people on  
13 Zoom. So you can join us, Bob Libal and Tammy Reed.  
14 Bob, you may go ahead.

14 BOB LIBAL: Thank you so much. Good  
15 afternoon. My name is Bob Libal. I'm the Senior  
16 Campaign Strategist at the Sentencing Project, a  
17 national research and advocacy organization that has  
18 worked for 40 years for a fairer US criminal legal  
19 system. Thank you to the chairs, your staff,  
20 committee members, and all of the New York City  
21 advocates for this hearing and your important work on  
this issue.

1  
2 We urge the City Council to enact  
3 legislation to support robust voting infrastructure,  
4 including polling locations at Rikers and future  
5 borough-based jails, and to support the statewide  
6 Democracy During Detention Act.

7  
8 Simply put, jail should not be democracy  
9 dead zones. As we've heard, well over 80% of the  
10 people at Rikers are detained pretrial and do not  
11 lose their right to vote. However, jail often acts as  
12 a physical barrier to the ballot box. According to  
13 the committee report, less than 10% of eligible  
14 voters cast their ballots. And because 93% of those  
15 at Rikers are people of color, this isn't just an  
16 administrative hurdle; it's also a racial justice  
17 issue. Disparities in the criminal legal system are  
18 leading to disparities in access to democracy.

19  
20 Furthermore, with most incarcerated  
21 people held nationwide, simply because they can't  
22 afford bail, de facto disenfranchisement has become  
23 something of a poverty penalty that locks New Yorkers  
24 and others out of democracy.

25  
26 However, we know that solutions exist. We  
27 have seen that when people are given the means to  
28 vote, they do in fact vote. In some cities that have

1  
2 enacted jail-based voting locations, often combined  
3 with robust civics education programs, it turns out  
4 that the jail has actually exceeded turnout in the  
5 broader community.

6 In Chicago, establishing a jail-based  
7 polling site at the Cook County Jail saw turnout jump  
8 from 7% to over 50%, which was the highest  
9 participation rate in the city.

10 In Colorado, following the passage of  
11 SB-24, jail voter turnout surged from 4% in 2020 to  
12 25% in 2024. And this increase was driven by new  
13 requirements for in-person voting options and  
14 improved coordination between county clerks and  
15 sheriffs.

16 In Washington, D.C., 83% of jail-based  
17 residents cast a ballot in 2024, actually  
18 outperforming the general public.

19 We've also seen jail-based voting  
20 locations take root in California and in several  
21 counties in Texas, which is where I'm located.

And as was mentioned by an earlier  
speaker, a colleague of mine produced a report on  
voting in Maine and Vermont prisons, states that do  
not disenfranchise people who are serving felony

1  
2 prison time. And while barriers still exist there,  
3 there are many lessons for developing access for  
4 incarcerated voters in Rikers and other jails.

5 We've also produced a brief summary of  
6 research that shows that voting helps  
7 justice-impacted people maintain a civic identity and  
8 stay connected to their communities, and results in  
9 better public safety outcomes.

10 So not only is it good for incarcerated  
11 New Yorkers, but it's good for all (TIMER) us to  
12 maintain that connection... (CROSS-TALK)

13 SERGEANT AT ARMS: Time has expired.

14 BOB LIBAL: (INAUDIBLE) people out of  
15 jail. Thank you very much. We really appreciate the  
16 time.

17 CHAIRPERSON BREWER: Thank you very much.

18 Tammy Reed?

19 (NO RESPONSE)

20 CHAIRPERSON BREWER: Tammy Reed?

21 (NO RESPONSE)

22 CHAIRPERSON BREWER: I think you need to  
23 unmute.

(NO RESPONSE)

1  
2 CHAIRPERSON BREWER: Okay, Tammy, we can't  
hear you. Do you still wish to speak?

3 (NO RESPONSE)

4 CHAIRPERSON BREWER: Tammy, we will accept  
5 any material that you send in writing. Unfortunately,  
6 there seems to be a technical issue. But we look  
7 forward to hearing whatever you have to say in  
writing. Thank you very much.

8 And without further ado, this hearing  
9 concludes, but not the work. The work will be  
10 ongoing. And thank you very much for being here.

(APPLAUSE)

11 CHAIRPERSON BREWER: And thank you, my  
12 colleague, Selvena Brooks-Powers, who's an amazing  
13 Chair. Thank you.

(APPLAUSE)

[GAVEL]

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C E R T I F I C A T E

World Wide Dictation certifies that the foregoing transcript is a true and accurate record of the proceedings. We further certify that there is no relation to any of the parties to this action by blood or marriage, and that there is no interest in the outcome of this matter.



Date June 15, 2026